



The West End Front: The Wartime Secrets of London's Grand Hotels

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The Ritz, the Savoy, the Dorchester and Claridge's - during the Second World War they teemed with spies, con-artists, deposed royals and the exiled governments of Europe. And now, Matthew Sweet's *West End Front* is just as teeming with the incredible cast of characters from this unique period of London's history.

Meet the girl from MI5 who had the gravy browning licked from her legs by Dylan Thomas; the barman who was appointed the keeper of Winston Churchill's private bottle of whisky; the East End Communist who marched with his comrades into the air-raid shelter of the Savoy; the throneless prince born in a suite at Claridge's declared Yugoslav territory for one night only. Matthew Sweet has interviewed them all for this account of the extraordinary events that unfolded under the reinforced ceilings of London's grand hotels.

Using the memories of first-hand witnesses, the contents of newly declassified government files and a wealth of previously unpublished letters, memoirs and photographs, he has reconstructed a lost world of scandal, intrigue and fortitude.

The West End Front: The Wartime Secrets of London's Grand Hotels Details

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Author : Matthew Sweet

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From Reader Review The West End Front: The Wartime Secrets of London's Grand Hotels for online ebook

Agnesxnitt says

I read this book when it first came out - courtesy of my excellent local library - and when I found this paperback copy in the same library sale I snapped it up.

A really interesting and entertaining read. Its often said that people go to hotels to do the things they would never do at home - and apparently this is very true!

The author covers bad behaviour, royal goings on, medical misdoings, warfare, espionage, social challenges and the eye opening at the Ritz, the Savoy, Claridges and the Dorchester in fine style.

A really good book!

Ian Wright says

Fascinating story of home front in WWII. Enjoyed story of CP and RCP agitation and the personal histories of spies and those suspected, often wrongly of spying. Great piece of research. Only criticism was the way author felt need to cram all his research in, a bit distracting being taken through the back story of bit part players while following already complex personal stories.

Jim McGrath says

This book begins with a great anecdote about the start of the Second World War but nothing that follows matches the opening for clarity and impact. The book falls between being a 'popular' read for the lay person and a text book. If I was writing my MA dissertation on the home front during the war this book would be essential reading. But I'm not and I found many passages heavy going.

That said if you want to know how some of the upper classes spent their war this provides a very valuable insight. As always the political canard 'We are all in this together' did not apply to those with wealth and connections.

Phil Lecomber says

Matthew Sweet has done an excellent job in researching the intriguing world of London's luxury hotels during the turbulent years of WWII. In many cases he tracked down the surviving characters (or their nearest relatives) to get the stories straight from the horse's mouth. It's all in here - Blackshirts, illegal abortions, spies and European royals in exile.

I did find at times that the pace started to drag a little (especially when investigating the minutiae of the daily comings and goings of King Peter II of Yugoslavia) - but overall, an enjoyable foray into the history of the cosseted upper classes, and the people that served them during the war.

Petra CigareX says

This is the sort of book you give to that person who has 'everything' at Christmas. It is pretty much boring, all about how the rich survived during the war, and they survived very well indeed visiting hotels, nightclubs and restaurants and being kowtowed to as they always had been by staff who went home to lives made miserable and hard with the shortages of war.

So why is this an ideal present? Because when it isn't pissing you off it's boring. So it isn't going to sell well and will be on the remainder list by November. Then you'll be able to get a nice, shiny, impressive-looking hardback for just a couple of quid to give to that person who has everything. And he* will no doubt identify with the patrons rather than the staff in the book and will think what a great gift you chose. (view spoiler)

However, I don't blame the author for this rather milk-and-water book, I think he chose the wrong subject and his other books might be a great deal better.

2.5 stars - it was ok, but didn't have any enthralling or unputdownable moments. I rounded it up to 3 stars because there was a certain amount of fascination with the way people coddle and cocoon the rich and pretend they really are a higher form of life (view spoiler) in order to part them from their money. And just how the rich swallow all this arse-licking guffery and believe they really are a higher form of life and it behooves them to be generous with their largesse. Actually they really do know that they only get treated like that because of their money, but if they admitted that, even to themselves, they'd have to let go of the notion they are somehow special, so they don't.

Geevee says

A very enjoyable and different approach to the war in London and society. See Bettie's review for the episodes as read on BBC Radio 4's Book of the Week. I am sure the printed version will be as good as the audio, where Kenneth Cranham narrated this so well.

David Bisset says

Truth stranger than fiction! The book is amusing, outrageous and informative. It is enthralling social, political and military history. When I walk past these hotels which are the bastions of privilege, I shall ponder upon Mathew Sweet's revelations.

Josie says

[audiobook version]

If I never hear the word "plutocracy" again it will be TOO SOON.

F.R. says

This guide to the world beneath the facade of the grand hotels of London during the Second World War is a book which was always going to be up my street. There would be the normal wartime intrigue and British stoicism in the face of German bombs; there would be the lives of real people trying to cope with it all; but there would also be the added spice of grandes – men of state, millionaire playboys, celebrities – all thrust together with the war spinning around them. And yet, despite some fascinating material, *The West End Front* was never as compulsive as I wanted it to be.

True, there are some great tales – including conmen (and other criminals), the gay underground in the hotel bars, abortionists, revolutionaries and political activists. And yet I don't think Matthew Sweet makes the most of this material. He has a habit of wandering down side alleys that are clearly highly interesting to him, but are never made as interesting to the reader. For example, the yarn about the Yugoslav King staying at the hotel does go on many more pages than it should (although it does allow the tale of the assassination of his father, one of the first such murders caught on film - and available to view on youtube). As such there are some genuinely intriguing tales here, stories I enjoyed very much, and yet the whole left me underwhelmed.

The author clearly has a great fondness for the rather archaic term 'hugger-mugger' and wields it again and again – as if waging a one man campaign to bring it back to popular usage. At first I found this habit a little jarring, but after a while I got onboard and decided that all authors should take an old fashioned word or phrase and hammer it into the ground throughout their work in an effort to rehabilitate them. Mine will be 'lubricous'

Michael Moseley says

Not a book I would have picked up myself but a well received Christmas present. This book challenges our cosy view of the wartime home life with quotations of all being in it together and rationing affecting all of the population. The very rich seemed to get away with it yet again. Little evidence of severer hardships for people staying in London's top hotel. The book was less about the experience of the institutions themselves more about the people who were tied up with them during the war. Be that staff or guest. The level of detail in the research was astounding and you really got a lot of detail about people and their lives. The same peacetime mix of sex, money, power, tragedy and intrigue. How our lives of moved on , all for the better, at least we do not leave young women to die from botched abortions in hotel beds or lock people up for where they put their willies.

Tony says

This is the third Matthew Sweet book I have read and is as interesting and well-written as the previous two. Like those, it teases out the forgotten - or mythical - history of a period or place. In this case the luxury hotels of London's West End.

There are stories of the straight and the gay, men and women, heroes and traitors and Kings and

Communists. Class matters in this book. Each chapter deals with a particular subject and is well-researched, including interviews with people who were involved in the events he is describing.

He's good at reminding us in some chapters about the darker aspects of what happened in the hotels, such as murders and illegal abortions. The chapter that is mainly about Stella Lonsdale is particularly good at trying to find out what was really going on behind her story and reminding us of the cost of her - possible - betrayal.

Also, it is always good to find a book about World War Two that doesn't skirt the fact that there was a lot of sex going on. I laughed at this quote, " They were rehearsing in a hotel ballroom when Churchill declared Victory in Europe. It was a raucous, joyous, unforgettable evening: the ships' sirens brayed and hooted all night in Southampton Water. Joyce woke up on the first morning of the peace and watched the gardener picking discarded condoms from the rose bushes." You don't get scenes like that in most films and television about World War Two do you?

Great fun to read and packed full of stories waiting to be expanded on.

Jeff Howells says

This is one of those books of social history that shines its spotlight on a very specific time and place. This is about the wartime experiences of the staff and guests of the 'Grand Hotels' of London during the Second World War (primarily The Ritz, The Savoy, The Dorchester and Claridges). Anyone who thinks that permissiveness and general bad behaviour is a post sixties invention (yes I'm looking at you Daily Mail) should read this. It will often make your hair curl. Mathew Sweet is one of my favourite cultural commentators mainly because he always has a very witty turn of phrase. This story could have been a bit of a slog, but it was actually a hell of a romp.

rachael gibson says

Genuinely fascinating stories but also just brilliantly written. The author has an incredible turn of phrase which made me laugh out loud pretty constantly.

Reds_reads says

For a book that bills itself as full of the wartime secrets of London's grand hotels, this was neither as scandalous nor as full of revelations as I expected. I did not really enjoy the style of writing either - too knowing, and for a book with an enormous cast of characters, adopting a smart-arse sarcastic tone doesn't aid clarity.

There was a lot of period detail in the book and I did feel that the book was reassuringly well researched but still felt let down. I can't say I was very surprised by anything in here, don't most of us know that one hotel room was designated Yugoslavian for the birth of a Prince? And the presence of a West End gay scene and women dying of botched abortions may have been kept quiet about but are hardly things we don't already know, at least in broad terms. In fact the book can be quite coy, alluding to liaisons and practices which may

well be scandalous, but if we aren't told what they are, we remain unshocked.

The most explicitly detailed sections seem to cover industrial relations, strikes and communist infiltrators, quite interesting, but not really shocking - poor working conditions in the hotel industry still exist.

Read for the period detail by all means, but don't expect to learn many "secrets" you didn't already know or could have guessed at.

Bettie? says

Book of the Week

history

WWII

spies

glbt

LONDON

blurb - *Kenneth Cranham reads Matthew Sweet's dark history of the scandalous life above and below stairs in London's grand hotels during the Second World War. While bombs rain down on London's East End, life in the capital's glittering hotels carries on regardless, with hotels like the Ritz, the Dorchester, the Savoy and Claridge's becoming mini Casablancas, where spies and con artists, traitors and royalty rub shoulders under the reinforced ceilings.*

Reader: Kenneth Cranham Producer: Justine Willett Abridger: Viv Beeby Writer: Matthew Sweet - presenter of 'Night Waves' and 'Freethinking' on BBC Radio 3, as well as several documentaries on BBC Four, and author of 'Inventing the Victorians' and 'Shepperton Babylon'.

1 - as rationing hits, London's well-heeled diners chomp their way through acorns, turnips and eels in a nod to the war effort. (did you spot Clement Freud's little bit of fun?)

2 - As the Blitz begins in earnest, a group of East Enders storm the Savoy in demand of decent shelter for all.

3 - Two clandestine networks - the homosexual subculture and London's spy community - form an unlikely alliance at the bar below the Ritz.

4 - Mussolini's involvement in the conflict breeds hostility against Italians, and the Savoy's waiting staff must prove their allegiance to Britain or face detention.

5 - The final part of Matthew Sweet's history of London's grand hotels during World War II. The weird and wonderful clientele of the Dorchester carries on regardless.

From the Guardian: Ballroom blitz: sex and spying in London's wartime hotels

Thoroughly recommended. 4*
