



The Perfect Summer: England 1911, Just Before the Storm

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The Perfect Summer chronicles a glorious English summer a century ago when the world was on the cusp of irrevocable change. Through the tight lens of four months, Juliet Nicolson's rich storytelling gifts rivet us with the sights, colors, and feelings of a bygone era. That summer of 1911 a new king was crowned and the aristocracy was at play, bounding from one house party to the next. But perfection was not for all. Cracks in the social fabric were showing. The country was brought to a standstill by industrial strikes. Temperatures rose steadily to more than 100 degrees; by August deaths from heatstroke were too many for newspapers to report. Drawing on material from intimate and rarely seen sources and narrated through the eyes of a series of exceptional individuals — among them a debutante, a choirboy, a politician, a trade unionist, a butler, and the Queen — *The Perfect Summer* is a vividly rendered glimpse of the twilight of the Edwardian era.

The Perfect Summer: England 1911, Just Before the Storm Details

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From Reader Review The Perfect Summer: England 1911, Just Before the Storm for online ebook

Janice says

Non-fiction about the lives of people in England before WWI. I liked it but it didn't hold my attention completely.

Isabel says

This book, written by the grand daughter of Vita Sackville-West, focuses on 5 months in 1911 (May-September). Why should it interest us? It covers an unnaturally hot summer in which the temperatures soar to 85-100F, a drought ensues, national strikes shut down many industries, the docks and the railways, children walk out on their classes in protest and Germany begins its move towards 1914.

The book doesn't focus on just one class - it witnesses the summer through the eyes of aristocrats, their servants, factory workers, union leaders, politicians, artists, poets and children. It's fascinating for those of us who enjoy slipping back into the past and trying to understand who we are by reading about who we were. I highly recommend this book.

Mark says

I loved the subject matter of this book, but about three chapters in, I decided it just had to go back to the library because the writing was driving me crazy. An editor I knew once said that one of his reporters seemed to organize his stories by cutting his notes into pieces and pasting them randomly on the page. Juliet Nicolson is guilty of something similar. While she tries to organize this book chronologically, she seems to lack almost all sense of transition, so you can be reading about the young Winston Churchill at one point and suddenly be treated to the outfits worn by a famous ingenue. Snip snip paste paste. Too disconcerting.

Carole says

Set against the backdrop of the long hot Summer of 1911 we see English life through the eyes of several different people including

- * Queen Mary (who's husband George V was to be crowned the new King in May) and who 'had never felt so lonely'
- * Politician Winston Churchill
- * Lady Diana Manners (a debutante) who was looking forward to a Summer of relentless partying
- * War Poet Siegfried Sasson who, in the middle of the summer, said 'We seemed to have forgotten that there was such a thing as the future'
- * Butler Eric Horne who thought some of the noblemen and women he worked for had 'a kink in the brain'
- * Trade Unionist Ben Tillett who almost brought the country to its knees through a series of industrial strikes

This is an absolutely absorbing look at the England of yesteryear, we see how life was changing especially for the under-class in society, they were beginning to question their role and the rules they were governed by.

Juliet Nicolson's detailed research could not be faulted and at the end of it I almost felt as if I had lived through the heatwave. I loved so many of the fascinating facts she gave us. Thinking about the present furore over many UK MP's expenses claims I found this nugget -

The proposed salary of £400 a year for Members of Parliament was not scheduled to come into effect until August: traditionally, MP's had funded themselves, from a private income or earnings outside the House of Commons.

How times have changed!!

Another entertaining fact regarding the rise of the picture-houses -

Some cinemas had tea-houses, and special sitting-out rooms reserved for ladies only. A reassuring manager in a tailcoat - like a maitre d'hotel in a restaurant or a butler opening a front door - would greet the audience as they arrived.

What a wonderful picture she painted of the everyday lives and loves of so many people, of their struggles just to survive in contrast to the upper-classes bored lives filled with playing bridge and partying.

My only criticism with The Perfect Summer is of the very lengthy paragraphs, some were almost a page long, of which many could have been edited better to make it easier to read.

However, if, like me, you love reading about the Victorian/Edwardian/Georgian way of life and can't resist (boring)enlightening anyone within listening distance of your amazing historical knowhow, you're going to want to add this to your collection.

?oincidental Dandy says

It took me two weeks to decide whether or not to purchase this book; glad I took the chance & did. A thoroughly good read from start to finish. Recommendable.

Jill Hutchinson says

I read this book when it was first published and just got around to reviewing it, after a quick re-read. I have since read The Great Silence: 1918-1920 Living in the Shadow of the Great War by this author and loved it, so with hindsight, I can say that I didn't like this one as well but still give it four stars.

Nicolson gives us a look at the summer months of 1911 when England was suffering one of its greatest heat waves. Tempers were short as Churchill, as Home Secretary, aggravated the Parliament; the general strike disrupted trade; Queen Mary really wasn't too fond of being Queen; the "Souls" were the epitome of high

society silliness; and the House of Lords was stripped of its power of veto. In other words, events were occurring and attitudes were being shaped that would color the future of England which was little suspecting the war that was just over the horizon, both literally and figuratively. It is a social history of interest.

Marsha says

I loved this book. I am both a history buff and an Anglophile, so this was the answer to two of my favorite wishes. Because Nicholson was related to some of the historical characters in the book, she made the history live with intimate stories and feelings. I had known some of the English history mentioned, but the information about the strike situation was new to me. I also liked that she included information about the arts of the time; the Russian ballet, English poets and academicians and wonderful details about architecture. Of course, following the parties and social gossip and activities of the London 'season' were absolutely my favorite. The politics of the time, including the Irish question, tied everything together to make a perfect book about that perfect summer.

Alix Stricklin says

I'm giving this a 5-star, even though this is a new writer. The writing style resembles stream of consciousness during the transitions, which is the weakest link in the book. However, the writer really makes you feel the concerns surrounding each social group she covers. This really tied this period of history together for me. I've studied different aspects of this period, but this is the first writer that I've read that has covered so many social elements in parallel - really helped my understanding of the country at that time. I also appreciate that she reported without apparent bias either for or against any particularly social group. This really helped me understand the push and pull going on within the social groups, between the social groups, politically within the country, and the major external conflict with Germany as well. Great book! I'd love to see her write more!

Ashley says

Juliet Nicholson's *The Perfect Summer* had promise, but it didn't fulfill my expectations. I was looking for a book that chronicled the summer, but had an argument. Nicholson failed to present a lucid historical argument and because of this, the book meandered.

I was not captivated and it took me far too long to finish the book. I had to put it down only to pick it back up weeks or months later. As a history major, I was expecting to enjoy this novel and learn something about British society in the era leading up to the First World War. I did to a point; however, there were too many details. The book needed serious editing. There was no clear argument or narrative path. I did not understand why there were so many jumps between "characters" and could not keep track of what everybody was doing. The details needed to be cut. The argument needed to be more concise and there should have been a reason why certain people were grouped together.

Overall, this book is not scholarly enough to be considered an academic source and not engaging enough for me to recommend it to non scholarly readers. An interesting topic ruined by poor editing.

Diane Barnes says

I was very disappointed in this book. The writing was not very good. It reminded me of a 7th grader assigned to write a report, reading the encyclopedia, and listing the facts and pertinent information with no interest whatsoever, just to get it done. In fact I did not finish the last 3 chapters, and quickly skimmed the ones I did read. The sense of the lifestyles and politics and clothing styles were all very familiar to me just from watching Downton Abbey. There was one chapter describing the lives of the servants, but the rest was mainly a name-dropping narrative about the wretched excesses and immoral behavior of the ruling class. And I'm sorry, but for a person living in Charleston, SC, any tales of people going mad and having seizures from the unbearable heat of 85° is just laughable. Not recommended to anyone who cares about quality of writing, and I'm still trying to figure out where all the glowing reviews came from.

Jennifer says

I have lukewarm feelings about this book. At times it was very interesting and I gained a general understanding of the culture of England in 1911.

However, I felt that this book would have benefitted from some tighter editing. The author jumped between topics with no warning. I found myself having to go back several times and re-read paragraphs because I couldn't figure out how we got from one topic to the next. In many cases, there was no rhyme or reason as to where we ended up.

This book was obviously very well researched, but I felt that the author at times added historical "tidbits" simply because she found them, not because they contributed to the book. "Characters" were introduced and then never mentioned again. There was no sense of closure, and very little tying the information together other than the fact that all these events occurred in England during the summer of 1911.

An interesting, although frustrating, read.

Tim says

A lovely, thought-provoking portrait of England before the First World War. Like 1599, it is a biography not of a person but of a year. I loved the way it brought together people whose names we all know (Churchill, George V, Nijinsky, Rupert Brooke, Virginia Woolf) with others less well known, authors like Elinor Glyn and Vita Sackville West (the author's grandmother), early union leaders Ben Tillett and Mary Macarthur, tattle-tale butler Eric Horne, and Churchill's fierce political enemy but dearest personal friend F.E. Smith.

The style is compulsively readable, full of clever juxtapositions that give a wonderful sense of the time. It's a bit like the style of Harper's Index, the news of the day that, in sum, gives a sense of the day.

And as the granddaughter of Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West, Juliet Nicolson seems to have access

to some fabulous stories and materials that are humble in their content but piquant, and used in devastating juxtaposition to the news of the day.

This is a book that made me laugh out loud, and frequently read passages to anyone around me who would listen.

P.S. I'm a sucker for forgotten authors because I find that the "second tier" books often give a better sense of the day than the classics that have stood the test of time. They are of their time, passed over because they are "dated," but it is that very fact that makes them a clearer window into the past.

Now I have to dig up those Vita Sackville-West and Elinor Glyn novels I have buried somewhere in my library :-)

Leslie says

Nicolson's eagerly awaited exploration of the Summer of 1911 is interesting, entertaining in places, even - but quite scattershot. The threads never quite come together in this erratically woven recounting of the political, social, and economic climate in one of England's hottest summers just preceding the First World War.

A familiarity, if not long acquaintance, with the many of the leading characters of the day is desirable, as Nicolson's swift transitions leave little room for introductions. Queen Mary, at least, is given a proper introduction, but then left to shift for herself for much of the rest of the book. While several personae are returned to throughout the book, none is truly accorded the place of protagonist.

The Perfect Summer well may have benefited either from a non-chronological narrative or a tighter editing for the reader to truly appreciate Nicolson's research and writing.

Oodles says

Using diaries and other records, Ms. Nicholson guides the reader through 4 months of England in 1911 - the hottest summer on record. King George's Coronation was held that year and his wife, Mary confronts her fears of being Queen. Her mother-in-law refuses to move out to the Dowager House. Winston Churchill and F.E. Smith are enemies on the floor of Parliament but the best of friends otherwise. Virginia Smith (later Woolf), Rupert Brooke, Lytton Strachey, Rudyard Kipling, and other poets and writers are living their lives. The younger set is acting up. The dockworkers are striking. It was a fascinating snapshot of "the calm before the storm" of WWI and I found it well written and sublime.

Paul says

Enjoyable, although slightly odd look at the long hot summer of 1911. There are lots of interesting facts and insights into daily life; mainly for the upper classes and their servants. There were also some interesting leads to other books and references to follow and find. The focus is mainly on the upper classes with the Royal Family and members of the government having some prominence, along with some of their wives and

daughters. These are predictable and confirm that the sex lives and loves of the rich and famous continue as always. There are interesting insertions about the national dock strike and the trade unionist Ben Tillett. The book felt a little disjointed with a lack of focus and there are sections which felt superfluous and over descriptive. However there are fascinating snippets of information and it is an easy read
