



Keeping Their Place: Domestic Service in the Country House

Pamela A. Sambrook

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In 1851 there were over a million servants in Britain. This book reveals first-hand tales of put-upon servants, who often had to rise hours before dawn to lay fires, heat water and prepare meals for their employers, and then work into the small hours. Yet there are also heartwarming stories of personal devotion, and reward, and of how the servants enjoyed themselves in their time off. There are moments of great poignancy as well as hilarity: a steward's dawning realisation that the housekeeper he befriended is a thief; a young footman chasing a melon as it rolls through a castle's corridors into the moat; the smart manservant weeping at the station as he bids farewell to his mother. This was an era when footmen were paid extra for being six foot or over, and female servants had to wear black bonnets to church.

Keeping Their Place: Domestic Service in the Country House Details

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From Reader Review Keeping Their Place: Domestic Service in the Country House for online ebook

Molly says

I love books like this. The Social history of England especially.

Louise Culmer says

QUite an interesting book about life in domestic service in the great country houses, in the servants' own words. i was slightly disappointed that more than half of the quoted passages were taken from previously published books, some of which I had read before. i had hoped for more original material.

Paul says

Most of this book is excerpts of letters written by or about servants in the 18, 19 and early 20th centuries. From these excerpts you get an insight into the variety of working conditions they encountered, which was interesting, but more enjoyable were the charming anecdotes. In a life that could be very dull and hard, there were also opportunities to socialize and do things they enjoyed.

The focus is on service in country houses which were often large estates which required many servants. The class divide between the servants and their employers is evident but there was also a hierarchy among the help. Some servants worked directly with their employers, wearing nicer clothing and earning higher wages, even traveling with the family. Others were hardly seen upstairs and in the worst cases earned little more than room and board.

As a person providing gardening services to my customers, I was intrigued by the relationships between employer and 'the help'. In my experience some people are totally trusting and generous while others seem eternally suspicious. In light of other services or companies I've dealt with, even though the majority have been reasonable, some have been reprehensible so I guess I can't blame them. It seems that was as true then as it is today. In the book there are stories of some who were treated like family after years of service and others who are treated quite coldly.

This is a read that would be easy to pick up and put down as you wish since the source material is so varied. In spite of that I found I finished it quicker than most of the books I read.

Mark says

Before the invention of labor-saving home appliances, live-in domestic servants were an indispensable component of the country house. Over a million Britons were employed as domestics in the mid-nineteenth century, and the greatest houses required staffs of over a hundred servants to perform the myriad number of functions necessary for their smooth operation. Yet in spite of their ubiquity, most of them remain to us as

unseen and unheard from as they were often expected to be in performance of their duties. Pamela Sambrook's achievement is to turn these servants into real people by using their writings to convey what life was like for those "downstairs."

To that end, Sambrook combed through published and unpublished collections of letters, diaries, memoirs, and other works for illustrative passages. Covering country house life from the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, the selections capture the patterns and experiences of the servants' everyday lives. She presents them thematically by grouping them into sections that examine different aspects of their lives, from their recruitment and work to their recreations and old age. Each chapter begins with a short overview summarizing these experiences, which provides a useful context when reading the passages that follow. But it is the words of the servants themselves which are at the heart of the book, giving voices to these long-silent figures.

Through this method, Sambrook succeeds in transforming the servants into real people. Some of her selections are funny, others are tragic, but all of them help the reader to understand the lives they and their colleagues led. With an excellent bibliography of her sources as a guide to further reading, this is an good starting point for anyone seeking to learn about the lives of domestic servants in the country houses.
