



*The Countess:
The Scandalous Life of Frances
Villiers, Countess of Jersey*

Tim Clarke

Gloucstershire: Amberley Publishing, 2016

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The Countess: The Scandalous Life of Frances Villiers, Countess of Jersey. By Tim Clarke. Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2016. ISBN 978-1-44565-626-7. 384 pp. £20.00.

The scandalous reputation of Frances Villiers, Countess of Jersey, is notorious among historians of the late eighteenth century. To date, interest in the Countess has primarily concerned her five-year affair with the Prince of Wales, later George IV, and her involvement in orchestrating both his separation from his long-term mistress, Mrs Fitzherbert, and his disastrous marriage to Princess Caroline of Brunswick. Tim Clarke's book, *The Countess: The Scandalous Life of Frances Villiers, Countess of Jersey*, is the first biography of the Countess, and reveals that there was so much more to the woman—and her life—than the infamous affair. Beginning with a chapter about her early life, entitled “The Beautiful Miss Twysden”, and ending with a reflective look at “The Verdict of History”, Clarke works his way through the Countess's life chronologically; although, he occasionally becomes repetitive while recounting the escapades of her adult children in the later years of her life.

Frances Twysden, born in 1753, was the daughter of the youngest son of a baron, who—as was the custom for younger sons—had joined the church, but allegedly died as a highwayman shortly before her birth. From these murky origins, Frances managed to raise her social status by marrying the unwitting George Villiers, the 4th Earl of Jersey, in 1770. The couple's first three children were legitimate—including the important male heir. The Countess went on to have eight more children, who may have had as many as four different fathers—though the Earl recognised all of them as his own. The Countess had affairs with many men over the years, perhaps the most astonishing of which included a man *and* his son, as well as a man who married the Countess's daughter after their affair ended. Contemporary commentators labelled the Earl a cuckold for staying with his wife, and the pair were lampooned by caricaturists. By including some of the letters in which the Earl defends his wife's behaviour to their friends and family, Clarke demonstrates that the Earl was very much the downtrodden husband that history has judged him to be.

Despite the lack of primary sources, Clarke somewhat overcomes the issue of writing the biography of a woman whose own voice cannot be captured by using a variety of material. The Countess was not much of a letter writer and some of her letters were destroyed after her death, no doubt in an attempt to dispose of the evidence of her scandalous secrets. Instead, he relies on a vast amount of private correspondence between her husband and the couple's friends and family. Using these sources, alongside others that discuss

the Countess's behaviour, such as newspaper reports, Clarke assembles a well-rounded picture of what her contemporaries thought of her. Despite the limitations of the source material, Clarke's ambition to rescue her character after two hundred years of vilification is perhaps surprising, yet in this he is fairly successful. He puts forward a convincing theory that history has been doubly unkind to the Countess because, in part, she has been confused with—and blamed for—the sins of her daughter-in-law, the 5th Earl of Jersey's wife. This Countess of Jersey, Sarah Villiers, also had multiple affairs and was involved in the highly contentious Queen Caroline affair in 1820, a year before the dowager Countess's death.

Theories aside, Clarke's reportage of the words of the Countess's contemporaries does redeem her character to a certain degree. They present her as a fierce and loving mother, as well as a woman who boldly defied social conventions at a time when double standards reigned. Clarke does not deny that she could be manipulative, calculating, and at times malevolent, but demonstrates that when personal accounts of her are taken into consideration, contemporary perceptions of her character were more complex than we have been led to believe. The Countess could be caring and charismatic; whilst other upper-class individuals did not adore her, she was still an active player in high society, who managed to charm both men and women against their will. She was a controversial woman—an "enchantress"—who enticed many men well into her old age, not unlike her contemporaries the Viscountess Melbourne and Lady Elizabeth Foster.

Overall, Clarke's biography of the Countess of Jersey is a good and interesting read, especially for anyone with an interest in the interconnection between the private and public lives of prominent women of the Regency aristocracy. He could have engaged more with the existing historiography on the complex world of aristocratic sexual and social conventions, given the number of anecdotes he discusses regarding reactions to the Countess's behaviour. The life of Frances Villiers makes a good case study for considering the extent to which a bad reputation could affect the lives of women of the Ton; as Clarke focuses on her whole life, the consequences of the Countess's behaviour for her daughters—especially as they entered the marriage market—also feature. Where Clarke lacks on the evaluation of high society, he makes up for by his detailed insight into an aristocratic family and their networks. In particular, the intimate look at how one husband dealt with his wife's adultery—although admittedly an unusual case—makes this

biography a unique account of upper-class marital behaviour that challenges the conventional image of the loveless marriages of the aristocracy.

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