

Downton Abbey: A rose-tinted depiction of class relations

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Downton Abbey has become one of the most popular television period drama shows in the world, and has won numerous accolades, including several Emmys and Golden Globes. The fifth series finished airing in the United Kingdom last month and started in the United States on January 4.

The drama, set in Yorkshire, depicts the lives of the Crawley family, including its patriarch Robert, Earl of Grantham (Hugh Bonneville), and its 16 servants, in the early decades of the twentieth century amid a long, drawn out decline in the fortunes of the aristocracy. Robert's central problem is the failure of his American heiress wife, Countess Cora (Elizabeth McGovern) to produce a male heir. The hunt begins to find their eldest daughter, Lady Mary (Michelle Dockery), a suitable husband who will keep the estate within the family.

To explain the popularity of this series, several things should be kept in mind. *Downton Abbey* is a lavish production, with elegant locations, accomplished actors, plenty of nostalgia and numerous love stories. Broadcast on a Sunday night, the period piece is doubtless seen as something for viewers to indulge in before their return to work on Monday morning.

For a certain percentage of the viewing public, confronted by so many films and television programmes that celebrate violence and psychotic killers (or policemen in various guises) and employ endless quantities of special effects and computer-generated imagery, or drool over the super-rich and demean the lives of ordinary people, *Downton Abbey* clearly comes as something of a welcome escape. Here is a series with quasi-intelligent dialogue, consistent characterisation, a narrative that holds one's interest (within limits), and it has some logic to it. This is not Tarantino or the recent films of Scorsese, this is not a comic book, this is not about super-heroes. To a certain extent, *Downton Abbey* is popular by default.

What it is, at heart, however, is a superficial, rose-tinted

soap opera that adds up to a crude distortion of history. It is a far cry from the reality—profoundly, extensively and subtly criticised by many socialists and artists who lived during the period. The series reflects the protracted decline of drama production and culture generally, the turn away from any interest or engagement with great social problems and the conditions of wide layers of the population. Instead what is sought is a way to distract and soothe the public at a time when rebellion and conscious action are needed.

The series' creator—actor, writer, director and Conservative member of the House of Lords Julian Fellowes—is clear about his perspective: that everyone should abide by his or her station in life. He wants us to abide by the “rules” and “choose something where you have a reasonable expectation of fulfilment”.

To this end, Fellowes falsifies the actual class relations of the time and creates a myth of stability and orderliness in a period, from the mid-1910s to the mid-1920s, beset by war and revolution. He intends this as a lesson for today. He admits as much, indicating he wanted *Downton Abbey* to be “history light” and hold back on the harsh realities for those living “below stairs.” Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, Fellowes declared, “I think the—well, not even the subtext, the supertext [of *Downton Abbey*] is that it is possible for us all to get on, that we don't have to be ranged in class warfare permanently.”

With this approach, Fellowes jettisons the reality of class conflict to a large extent, and substitutes a bucketful of unconvincing sub-plots providing suitable melodrama and infused with the kind of middle class politics that permeates cultural conversation today. All this is framed by familiar events that have become clichés—the sinking of the Titanic, the Great War where “nothing will ever be the same again,” and so on.

Historical records reveal that servants were sharply differentiated and segregated from their masters during

this period, often having to face the wall when the latter passed by. Not so in *Downton Abbey*. The aristocrats and servants are depicted as partners and confidantes in the crusade to save the estate. We are meant to empathise with them. Lord Grantham never evicts tenants despite his load of financial problems; Lady Mary tells one servant to take a few days off to look after his ill mother; and the Earl's youngest daughter, Lady Sibyl (Jessica Brown Findlay), gives career advice to her maid.

All of this reaches its implausible apogee in the figure and fate of chauffeur Tom Branson (Allen Leech). Initially an Irish Republican and Marxist, Branson abandons his political principles, instead deciding that the Bolsheviks are the enemy because of the killing of the Romanov royal family. Branson marries Lady Sybil and proceeds to help make the estate profitable. The ex-radical muses, "It's strange for me to be arguing about inherited money and saving estates when the old me would like to put a bomb under the lot of you".

Having belittled the essential axis of modern society—the class division—and written out the more fundamental social and economic sources of poverty, exploitation and oppression—Fellowes instead focuses on themes that will appeal to a complacent middle class audience whose current outlook is summed up by identity politics.

Another relative, Lady Rose (Lily James), falls in love with visiting black Chicago jazz musician Jack Ross (Gary Carr) and wants to get married, but, fortunately for all concerned, Jack does the honourable thing and calls off their engagement. Various intrigues revolve around gay servant Thomas Barrow (Rob James-Collier), and the Earl's middle daughter, Lady Edith (Laura Carmichael), who bears an illegitimate child.

Fellowes explains that one of his objectives in creating *Downton Abbey* was to counteract the influence of the "intelligentsia", who in the late 1960s and early 1970s had portrayed an "absolutely horrible" class-based British society, and to overturn the conceptions underlying the "leftist" dramas of the period. Chief amongst those were *Upstairs, Downstairs* (the 1971 television series) and *The Forsyte Saga* (twice made into television series, in 1967 and then again in 2002, based on the John Galsworthy trilogy), which attracted large audiences.

What is Fellowes attempting to overturn? For all its serious limitations, *Upstairs, Downstairs* ' depiction of the lives of the Bellamy family in Edwardian London "upstairs" and their servants "downstairs" presents a far more truthful picture of the social and economic changes

occurring in the era that *Downton* chronicles. Even then, of course, British television executives were keen to soften the down-to-earth tale of the lives of servants by the show's writers, Jean Marsh and Eileen Atkins, and demanded that some upstairs glamour be added.

The *Forsyte Saga* tells the story of a large Victorian capitalist family, similar to Galsworthy's own. Unlike Fellowes, Galsworthy challenged traditional moral, cultural and social values, even refusing a knighthood on grounds of principle in 1917. His works dealt with social issues such as inequality, women's rights, prison reform, censorship, anti-Semitism and the oppression of the working class. In the *Forsyte Saga*, he wonderfully satirises the Forsytes' stultifying obsession with money and status.

How does Fellowes compare? Julian Alexander Kitchener-Fellowes—Baron Fellowes of West Stafford—became a Conservative member of the House of Lords in 2011. He has had a long-standing gripe over the rules of royal succession regarding his wife, Emma, a Lady-in-Waiting to one of the Queen's hangers-on. Emma is niece of the present Lord Kitchener and is unable, to acquire the aristocratic title, which will die out because Kitchener has no male heirs.

Fellowes has even derided former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair for abolishing hereditary peerage and putting in its place "a curious amalgam of record-producers and early flatmates of the Prime Minister in an orgy of patronage reminiscent of the court of James I".

These views find expression in the banalities and rather predictable themes of *Downton Abbey*. Fellowes uses his talents to articulate the concerns of the upper middle class layers, outside the top one percent of society but perhaps still close enough to see the prospect of joining the elite. The outcome of all of this cleverness is a series that may soothe a section of its largely middle class audience, but fails to deliver a serious look at an important historical period.



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