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Mr. And Mrs. Disraeli: A Strange Romance



Synopsis

Deep in the archives of the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford lies a tattered scrap of paper with newlyweds' scribbles on it. It is a table listing the qualities of a couple. One column reads: "Often says what he does not think," "He does not show his feelings," "He is a Genius"; and the other: "Never says anything she does not think," "She shows her feelings," "She is a Dunce." The writing is Mary Anne Disraeli's, contrasting her own qualities with those of her husband, Benjamin Disraeli, one of the foremost politicians of the Victorian age. From the outset they made an unlikely couple. Mary Anne was the daughter of a sailor, twelve years Disraeli's senior, and married to someone else when they met. She was also highly eccentric, liable to misbehave, and (worse still) embarrassingly overdressed for grand society dinners. Her Diz was of Jewish descent, a mid-ranking novelist who was mired in debt. They made perfect targets for the vicious Victorian press and society gossips, who pounced on any and every foible. Yet their odd match appeared to make them impervious to such slings and arrows, as together they spun their unusual tale into a romance worthy of the novels they so loved. Reading between the lines of a great cache of their letters and friends' anecdotes, Daisy Hay shows how the Disraelis rose to the top of the social and political pile. Along the way, we meet women of a similar station and situation whose endings were far unhappier than Mary Anne's, acting as a counterpoint to her fairy-tale status as the landed angel in the prime minister's house. In an age where first ladies and their husbands are under ever-increasing pressure to perform and to conform, Mr. and Mrs. Disraeli offers a portrait of a political couple who refused to do either.

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Customer Reviews

This is an oddly moving biography, which looks at the marriage of Benjamin Disraeli and his wife Mary Anne. Both Disraeli and Mary Anne had a tendency to romanticise and reinvent their backgrounds and, later, their marriage. Mary Anne came from a fairly humble background and her marriage in 1815 to Wyndham Lewis, a wealthy man, but much older than her and very different in temperament, was largely due to financial and social considerations. Indeed, stories at the beginning of each chapter - often from newspapers of the time - show how reliant women were on marriage for financial security and status. At one point in the book, Mary Anne shows a certain reluctance to see some unmarried sisters that she was friends with, because of their increasing desperation to find husbands, which made their visits uncomfortable for her and her guests. This also becomes relevant when we come to Disraeli's life story and his beloved sister, Sarah, who remained unmarried. At times, he is torn between his sister and his wife, who becomes jealous of the attention he pays her. When Disraeli meets Mary Anne she is the wife of Wyndham Lewis and he is an MP. His career brings him to London, but, sadly for his wife, it did not bring her the social acceptance and widening social circle she hoped for. Her first husband's political career was to be as unremarkable as her second husband's was to be remarkable. Meanwhile, Disraeli, increasingly in debt, had begun writing novels which appealed very much to Mary Anne - in fact, she was just the readership he was aiming for with his 'silver fork novels'. Gradually, he begins to appear on her guest lists and she figures in his correspondence.

The life of Disraeli is of course much better known in detail than that of his wife Mary Ann. There is not much in this book about Disraeli that will be new to those who have read biographies of him, but Daisy Hay brings Mary Ann newly to life to many readers such as myself, and we do indeed get a lively, attractive, and rounded picture of her. Daisy Hay has read some 10,000 items in the Disraeli papers which relate specifically to Mary Anne but which have so far received little attention. I cannot say that I found everything she has garnered, for example the detailed accounts of Mary Anne's friends during her early and indeed her later years, particularly interesting. She was a flighty and flirtatious young woman, not particularly well-educated, but a great if fanciful chronicler of her own life, for example claiming at times to have been a milliner or a factory girl. In fact she came from a respectable but not well-off family. Her father, a seaman, had died when she was two; her mother was the daughter of a vicar. Mary Anne's first marriage was to a successful and wealthy

politician, Wyndham Lewis, fifteen years her senior, and she entered a social circle in which she would always be a bit of an outsider, but was an assiduous society hostess. She appreciated her husband's qualities although she did not love him deeply, and whom she deceived with various affairs as well as in the matter of financing her much-loved but wastrel brother John. Where Disraeli is concerned, Daisy Hay frequently emphasises his self-identification with Byron and Romanticism. He had begun to make a name for himself as a novelist, had entered society as an ambitious and witty outsider and there he had first met Mary Anne in 1832.

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