Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire
by Amanda Foreman

Georgiana Spencer was, in a sense, an 18th-century It Girl. She came from one of England's richest and most landed families (the late Princess Diana was a Spencer too) and married into another. She was beautiful, sensitive, and extravagant—drugs, drink, high-profile love affairs, and even gambling counted among her favorite leisure-time activities. Nonetheless, she quickly moved from a world dominated by social parties to one focused on political parties. The duchess was an intimate of ministers and princes, and she canvassed assiduously for the Whig cause, most famously in the Westminster election of 1784. By turns she was caricatured and fawned on by the press, and she provided the inspiration for the character of Lady Teazle in Richard Sheridan's famous play The School for Scandal. But her weaknesses marked the last part of her life. By 1784, for one, Georgiana owed many, many, many thousands, and her creditors dogged her until her death. Biographer Amanda Foreman describes astutely the mess that surrounded the personal relationships of the aristocratic subculture (Georgiana and the duke engaged for many years in a ménage à trois with Lady Elizabeth Fraser, who inveigled her way into the duke's bed and the duchess's heart). Foreman is, by her own admission, a little in love with her subject, which can lead to occasional lapses of perspective, but generally it adds zest to a narrative built on, rather than burdened by, scholarship, that is at once accessible and learned. An impressive debut, in every sense. --David Vincent, Amazon.co.uk

Georgianna deserves to find an American audience as proportionately big as its British audience. Georgiana was a smash over there in England, a country fond of behind-the-scenes stories of aristocratic ladies in the past. (And in the present, too: much has been made of the connections between the Duchess of Devonshire and her descendent, Diana, Princess of Wales.) Yet Amanda Foreman's Georgiana is much more than one of those ersatz popular biographies full of pillow talk and emotions that result more from the biographers' imagination than real research. The book is written in
an unpretentious, straightforward style that values clarity above everything. You dont have to be a Masterpiece-Theater-watching anglophile to appreciate its glamour, wit, and intrigue, and you dont have to be a professional historian to grasp its many provocative implications about history and the birth of mass political campaigning. Amanda Foreman must thank heaven every day that such a brilliant subject came her way, and she serves it well. Still, it would be hard to write an uninteresting book about the Duchess of Devonshire. She is a wonderfully paradoxical figure whose meaning seductively eludes the readers grasp: was she a dilettante or a genuine, energetic talent frustrated by the sexism of her time? Was she merely acting out of the privilege of her class (really, she was above class) or was she genuinely driven? The ladies of Stella Tillyards Aristocrats come across as pampered pawns who infrequently lucked into a little free will. Foremans Georgiana, in contrast, proves that at least one late-18th-century Englishwoman was capable of acting upon her will—even if she made more than one life-altering whopper of a bad decision.

Foreman clearly loves her subject, but she does not leave out the flaws and weaknesses in Georgiannas character—all her indulgence, dishonesty, and self-interestedness are on display here. Still, one of Georgiannas greatest charms was learning from her mistakes, and thus her life-narrative has the arc of a good novel. One problem: its hard for the non-historian to judge Foremans claim that the duchesss political success represented a general involvement of women in politics of the time greater than is usually acknowledged. What woman other than Georgiana, so unlike anyone else, enjoyed her kind of power and how many were so advantageously poised, by birth and marriage, to find or create that power? Still, Georgiannas story, in Foremans skillful telling of it, points to the truth of her claim that the propensity of womens historians to ignore high politics, and of political historians to ignore women, has resulted in a profound misunderstanding of one of the most sexually integrated periods of British history.

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