



The Housekeeper's Tale: The Women Who Really Ran the English Country House

Tessa Boase

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Working as a housekeeper was one of the most prestigious jobs a nineteenth and early twentieth century woman could want - and also one of the toughest. A far cry from the *Downton Abbey* fiction, the real life Mrs. Hughes was up against capricious mistresses, low pay, no job security and grueling physical labor. Until now, her story has never been told. *The Housekeeper's Tale* reveals the personal sacrifices, bitter disputes and driving ambition that shaped these women's careers. Delving into secret diaries, unpublished letters and the neglected service archives of our stately homes, Tessa Boase tells the extraordinary stories of five working women who ran some of Britain's most prominent households.

There is Dorothy Doar, Regency housekeeper for the obscenely wealthy 1st Duke and Duchess of Sutherland at Trentham Hall, Staffordshire. There is Sarah Wells, a deaf and elderly Victorian in charge of Uppark, West Sussex. Ellen Penketh is Edwardian cook-housekeeper at the sociable but impecunious Erddig Hall in the Welsh borders. Hannah Mackenzie runs Wrest Park in Bedfordshire – Britain's first country-house war hospital, bankrolled by playwright J. M. Barrie. And there is Grace Higgens, cook-housekeeper to the Bloomsbury set at Charleston farmhouse in East Sussex for half a century – an era defined by the Second World War.

Revelatory, gripping and unexpectedly poignant, *The Housekeeper's Tale* champions the invisible women who ran the English country house.



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