

Black sheep boys

SPLENDOUR & SQUALOR
The Disgrace and
Disintegration of Three
Aristocratic Dynasties
MARCUS SCRIVEN

★★★★☆

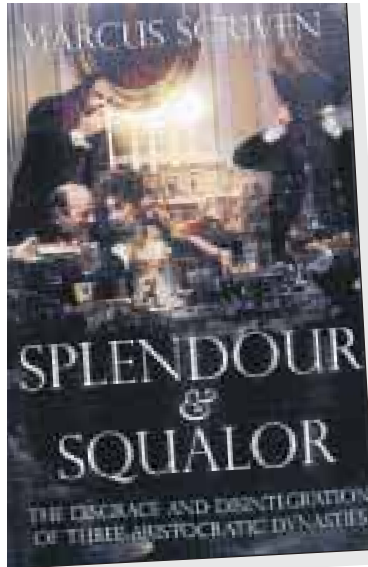
THERE is something compulsively fascinating about the way in which even the mightiest of dynasties inevitably decay.

It applies on a smaller scale, too. Somehow, hubris is so often rewarded with come-uppance, and it's at the heart of Marcus Scriven's wickedly-entertaining study. However, there's far more than mere *schadenfreude* going on here (although you get it by the bucketful). Scriven also gives us a detailed insight into those rarefied strata of society which for most of us will forever remain a foreign land. It's a fascinating and highly-instructive journey.

Scriven rightly reminds us that in 1876, it was estimated that two-thirds of the British Isles was in the hands of just 7,500 people. And, by and large, land was money. The income it generated was stupendous. The Duke of Bedford, for example, was in the mid-19th century raking in the equivalent today of over £200m a year.

It couldn't last, and it didn't. By the end of the 19th century cheaper imports of meat and grain were flooding into the country, and suddenly farmland changed from milk cow to millstone. However, some aristocratic families had far bigger problems to face than mere changing global economics. The unluckiest of them had to contend with "black sheep" who could make a family fortune disappear with breathtaking ease.

Scriven concentrates on three such families, and begins by introducing



us to Edward FitzGerald, 7th Duke of Leinster. The year is 1976, and the Duke is lying dead on the floor of his Pimlico bedsit, having swallowed a handful of barbiturates. His funeral follows a few days later, but apart from his grieving widow and a small handful of distant relatives, there is no one to mourn him.

Hardly surprising, considering the fact that over the course of his life he managed to divest himself and his family of their entire £400m fortune, running up debts in ever more inventive ways.

Some relatives tried to stop the haemorrhage of cash by selling off four-fifths of the family's jewellery, silver, paintings and porcelain – it was snapped up by Randolph Hearst for his San Simeon mansion – but it proved a futile gesture. Eleven years later, Edward was bankrupt for the third time.

Next, Scriven turns his attention to the Hervey dynasty, about whom he has a theory. He reckons they are "genetically destined for damnation".

This might seem to be putting things a bit strong, but he could have a point. In which case the family's "recidivist gene" must have appeared in quick succession. First there was Victor Frederick Cochrane

Hervey, the 6th Marquess of Bristol. An incorrigible liar (he claimed to have been awarded the Sword of Honour at Sandhurst, despite being removed after failing the junior course) he went on to add jewellery theft and fraud to his dubious CV. He died in 1985, "a cantankerous old bastard" in the accurate, if intemperate, words of his son John. However, as the 7th Marquess, John hardly set a better example, as he proceeded to turn the family estate into little more than a debauched, drug-fuelled theme park.

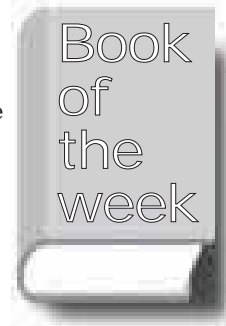
The third family spotlighted by Scriven is represented by Angus Charles Drogo Montagu, 12th Duke of Manchester, to whom must go the award for the most ignominious passing.

He died in 2002, after firemen had to use a hydraulic platform to extricate his 5ft 8in, 20 stone-plus frame from his small third-floor flat in Bedford. His death came some four years after his release from prison in the US, where he had served 28 months for fraud.

Those black sheep. They'll always have the last word.

ATLANTIC, £25

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