



# The Duchess

Toby and Duchess.  
Portrait by Steven Ashmore



When Kate Middleton became Duchess of Cambridge she made an old title modern again and caused people to look afresh at a dying breed: the non-royal duchess. Author **JANE DISMORE** tracks down some remaining members of that endangered species to examine the role of non-royal duchesses in the 21st century when privilege is not a popular concept

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# Diaries

**T**he Houses of the Oireachtas hosted two special visitors when the 9th Duke of Leinster returned to his ancestral seat with his Duchess in 2011. Leinster House, originally called Kildare House, was built by the Duke's ancestor, James FitzGerald, around 1747 when he was 20th Earl of Kildare. After centuries of the earls running Ireland on behalf of England's monarchs, in 1766 James was elevated to 1st Duke of Leinster by George III, making him the Premier Duke, Marquess and Earl in the Peerage of Ireland. As well as the renamed Leinster House, the family enjoyed medieval Kilkea Castle and Carton House in County Kildare. Time changes things, of course. When Edward FitzGerald, rebel son of James and his Duchess Emily, died in 1798 in the fight for a Republic, he could never have dreamed that one day his family's home would house the Irish Parliament. But although the property and power of the Dukes of Leinster have long gone, today's title holders, Maurice and Fiona FitzGerald, remain part

became Duke of Cambridge, Catherine his Duchess, and there is no reason to suppose the practice will not continue.

Giving the title of 'duchess' to someone as young and modern as Kate was to make it fresh, even desirable again. With her glossy hair and common touch, she not only breathed new life into the British monarchy, she renewed awareness of Britain's other duchesses, the non-royals. For non-royal dukedoms the future is not bright. They are dukedoms created by monarchs over the centuries for noblemen outside the royal family, for exemplary personal service. Of all non-royal titles, these were the highest accolade, so there were always very few of them. The greatest number to exist at one time was 40, at the end of George I's reign in 1727. By 1930 that number was down to 31 and now 24.

So who are the rare non-royal duchesses today? Many never speak publicly, and if they do, it is rarely about personal matters. Of the ten who feature in my book, some are known by the stately homes they still occupy and which visitors from all over the world enjoy — which is fortunate because, given their crippling expensive upkeep, such houses rely increasingly on the fascination of the world with Britain's heritage.

The Duchess of St. Albans, whose duke is a descendant of Charles II and his mistress, Nell Gwyn, says that sons can be “a disappointment”, while women can be “so responsible”

of a rare species: the non-royal duke and duchess.

The recent deaths of Debo, the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, and the 11th Duke of Marlborough, serve as a reminder of this increasingly-endangered species. Their ancestral seats — Chatsworth House in Derbyshire and Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire — are among Britain's best-known stately homes. Yet of over 800 hereditary titles in Britain today, there are only 24 non-royal dukes and, for reasons of death or divorce, fewer duchesses.

The non-royal dukes sit with their duchesses just one branch down from royalty on the aristocratic tree. There are those who hold much older titles, such as earls and barons, but dukes are the only ones entitled to be addressed by the monarch as “right trusty and entirely beloved cousins”. To everyone else they are “Your Grace”.

The highest-ranking duke is always royal and always the heir apparent: the sovereign's eldest son, who inherits the title of Duke of Cornwall. That was the first English dukedom, created in 1337 by Edward III for his eldest son, the Black Prince. Today's holder is Prince Charles, who is also the Duke of Rothesay, the secondary title of the sovereign's heir apparent in Scotland.

The latest ducal title to be conveyed by the Queen to a member of her family was in 2011, when her grandson Prince William

There is the Duchess of Northumberland at Alnwick Castle, popularly known these days as a location for the *Harry Potter* films; the Duchess of Bedford at Woburn Abbey, with its much-loved Safari Park; Rutland at Belvoir Castle, Buccleuch at Boughton House, Northamptonshire; in Scotland, Argyll at Inveraray Castle. Like Leinster, not all the duchesses still enjoy such houses. Those who do work phenomenally hard in maintaining them; those who do not are fully involved with other commitments, especially charities. The duchesses differ greatly in age, background and circumstances. However, they have in common a pride in being married into families which helped shape Britain's history.

**B**efore the titles by which they are identified become no more than a quaint reminder of Britain's past, it seemed right to record them, for it is unlikely that any more non-royal dukedoms will be created. The last was Fife, created by Queen Victoria for the Earl of Fife, twice: first in 1889, when he married her granddaughter, Princess Louise, eldest daughter of the Prince and Princess of Wales. When it looked as though there would be no male heir to continue the dukedom, Victoria created the title again in 1900, allowing the dukedom to pass to Fife's daughters in default of a son, and then to the male heirs of those daughters.

Generally, though, history has shown how rare it is for a duchess to inherit in her own right. Usually the title is achieved only by marriage, although in Scotland slightly more women have held the title themselves. They include Anne, 3rd Duchess of Hamilton, who at 19 inherited the title from her uncle during the Civil War; and Alexandra, Duchess of Fife, on the death of her father the 1st Duke, in 1912.

**T**he Queen offered a dukedom to Winston Churchill after he retired as Prime Minister in 1955, but after giving it careful consideration he declined, as the Parliament Act 1911 would have prevented his spending his last days in the House of Commons as he wanted to do.

Today's non-royal dukedoms are more likely to die out than be created. The (royal) Duchess of Cambridge may have caused the rules of succession to the throne to be changed to allow a girl to inherit, but the non-royal duchesses are still subject to the same pressure as they were centuries ago: to produce a male heir. The title of duke, like all hereditary titles, is granted with a 'remainder', or instructions as to whom the title must pass — usually a male. The most recent non-royal dukedom to become

and between 1834 and 1858 she had fourteen children. James's appointments meant he and Louisa spent much time in Ireland. In 1844 he was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Donegal, a post he held until his death, and in 1866 became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. With their younger children, the youngest of whom was eight, they moved to Dublin, living for most of the year in the Viceregal Lodge, Phoenix Park (now Áras an Uachtaráin), and from January to March at Dublin Castle.

It was a difficult period. However, Queen Victoria recognised the efforts of her Lord Lieutenant and in 1868 made James 1st Duke of Abercorn. Even though four of their children did not survive, when the widowed Duchess died in 1905, age 92, she left 169 direct living descendants. Among them were two dukes and two future dukes, and two of her daughters married dukes. Even Princes William and Harry are connected to her. The Duchess is known as the 'Golden Link' that connected around 50 families in the United Kingdom, and at least two of today's dukedoms continue from her.

The 1st Duke's ancestors had owned land in Ireland since 1610, when, as part of the Plantation, they were granted land in Co. Tyrone, including the estate of Baronscourt. Today, another

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extinct was Portland in 1990, with the death of the 9th Duke; his only son had predeceased him. (However, the title Earl of Portland continues and is currently held by actor Timothy Bentnick, the 12th Earl, who plays David Archer in BBC Radio 4's drama series, *The Archers*.)

One of the duchesses who agreed to be interviewed had three daughters before the requisite 'heir and a spare'. She was delighted with her bundles of joy — only to receive commiserations from 'well-wishers' advising her on how to have a boy. The late 9th Duke of Buccleuch, on hearing that his daughter-in-law, the future duchess, had had a girl, immediately cancelled the planned celebrations. Another duchess was told by the family historian at the start of her marriage that it was down to her to ensure the continuation of the dukedom, as there were no more males.

Each of today's duchesses in the book also chooses a favourite predecessor in the role. Some duchesses did more than their fair share to ensure continuation of the dukedom. The first Duchess of Abercorn, chosen by today's Duchess, is a prime example. In 1832 Lady Louisa Jane Russell was 20 when she married Scottish-born James Hamilton, then 2nd Marquess of Abercorn. Louisa was part of the early evangelical movement in England that believed large families were pleasing to God,

James Hamilton, the 5th Duke — the only nobleman to hold titles in the peerages of Ireland, Scotland and Great Britain — still lives there with his wife. In 2006 Sacha Abercorn received the Princess Grace Humanitarian Award of the Ireland Fund of Monaco for her work on trauma following the Omagh bombing. This was followed in 2008 by the OBE for her work with the Pushkin Trust, which she founded to help children in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. As far as her own children are concerned, today's Duchess has been more moderate than her predecessor, with two sons and a daughter. Continuity is assured, at least for now.

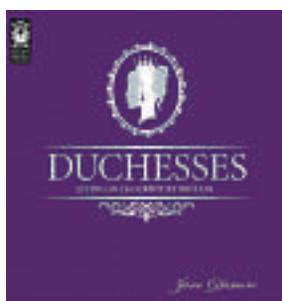
**A**s females cannot inherit titles in most cases, it means that some have either died out or passed to a distant relative. Sometimes that person has had little or no interest and, as property usually passes with a title, the situation has seen estates neglected or sold out of the family forever. Protests from families threatened by the absence of male heirs, despite having willing and capable daughters, has led to new laws being proposed. In May 2013, Lord Lucas introduced his Equalities (Titles) Bill — known as the Downton Abbey Bill because of that programme's storyline — to the House of Lords. However, the Bill has not progressed since December 2013. Since then, the Succession to

Peerages Bill 2014-15 has been introduced by Lord Trefgarne and had its first reading in June 2014. The Bill makes it possible for females to inherit under certain conditions, as well as making provision for peerages that became extinct on or after 6 February 1952, the date of the Queen's accession. If this Bill becomes law, perhaps it could help not only the extinct Portland dukedom but also Leeds (which became extinct in 1964) and Newcastle (1988).

Given the pressure on them to produce a male heir, it might be supposed that today's duchesses would be pleased that such legislation has been proposed. However, perhaps because they managed to fulfil the expectations upon them, some of those duchesses who feature are surprisingly against the idea of females inheriting. Fear of losing the family name upon a daughter's marriage is one reason. Unwanted pressure on daughters is another. The Duchess of Rutland says she thinks her eldest daughter would not want the responsibility of running the vast Belvoir estate. From a farming background herself, and having brothers, she never expected to inherit the family farm.

That is the way farming goes, she says; boys need a livelihood. However, her eldest son would have to 'cut his teeth' elsewhere first and prove he was capable of running the estate, a view that some other duchesses expressed about their heir. On the other hand, the Duchess of St. Albans, whose duke is a descendant of Charles II and his mistress, Nell Gwyn, says that sons can be "a disappointment", while women can be "so responsible".

One thing is certain. At present, Britain's non-royal dukes and their duchesses are an endangered species. It is time to discover who they are. 📖



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**FACING PAGE:**  
*Top left:* Interior of Barons Court, home of the Duchess of Abercorn  
*Top right:* Interior of Luton Hoo estate in Bedfordshire  
*Bottom:* The Duchess of Bedford and her family

**THIS PAGE:**  
*Top left:* The Duchess of Somerset  
*Top centre:* The Duke and Duchess of Abercorn  
*Top right:* Duchess of St. Albans' lounge  
*Bottom left:* Inveraray Castle, ancestral home of the Duke of Argyll  
*Bottom right:* The Duchess of Rutland