



An Elegant Madness: High Society in Regency England

By Venetia Murray

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The Regency period was one of the most turbulent ages in British history, one that spanned the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, that witnessed unprecedented industrial progress, artistic accomplishment, and violent social unrest and--paradoxically--the most sparkling social scene English high society has ever enjoyed. Under the influence of the obese, loose-moraled Prince of Wales (to whom **Jane Austen** dedicated **Emma**), the Regency was the apex of British decadence, an era of lavish parties and relentless bed-hopping that set a standard for elegance and vulgarity. With wit and lively style, **Venetia Murray** chronicles the scandals, courtships, and daily life of these aristocrats, and evokes the tempestuous times of the early industrial and French revolutions. Sumptuously illustrated with rare contemporary cartoons, prints, diaries, and caricatures, **An Elegant Madness** is a book readers of social history and historical romance alike will devour.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Regency England was, according to Venetia Murray, a "glorious paradox": High society placed a premium on civilized living, yet vulgarity, gluttony, and moral vicissitude were considered fashionable--and socially acceptable--vices. In *An Elegant Madness*, Murray examines this polarity, providing readers with an accurate, entertaining, easy-to-read portrayal that conveys the mood of the period, focusing primarily on the oft-paradoxical social practices and attitudes of the English aristocracy.

Generally understood as a 50-year period beginning, as with the French Revolution, just before the dawn of the 19th century, Regency England (or, more precisely, its uppermost strata) remained, in many ways, oblivious to and safely distanced from the ravages of the Napoleonic Wars consuming the continent. The tone of society, according to Murray, tends to be set by its titular head; thus, the paradox and political detachment of the Regency Period emanated primarily from its leader, the Prince Regent. The carefree Regent, who would reign as King George IV from 1820 to 1830, was known not only as "The First Gentleman of Europe," but also as a dedicated hedonist, drunkard, and lecher. Elegance and vulgarity characterized the rest of the English aristocracy, as well, and Murray's chapters clearly illustrate how Regency high society appropriated for itself the same duality as their leader's. Her chapters, each a freestanding study of its own, examine fashions of the period, the (exorbitant) cost of living, London high society, clubs and taverns, the common practice of taking a mistress, the country home, and the seaside resort. She embellishes her study with cartoons, prints, and caricatures of the period, all of which contribute to our understanding of this unique period of English history. --*Bertina Loeffler Sedlack*

From Publishers Weekly

History buffs, Anglophiles and perhaps even fans of Regency romances will enjoy this survey of the notoriously flamboyant English Regency period (here covering the years 1780-1830). In 13 well-researched chapters studded with excerpts from letters, diaries, journals and memoirs, Murray offers a lively portrait of upper-class life during a time marked by "elegance and style which are unique in the history of English culture." The influx of thousands of aristocratic refugees from the French Revolution spurred a frenzied embrace of French fashions, as well as the Prince Regent's ostentatious style, and transformed England during those 50 tumultuous years. Meanwhile, support of the Napoleonic war and the effects of the Industrial Revolution led to economic chaos: "in some cases rents were increased five-fold between 1790 and 1830." As the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, the vicious Luddite riots protested the unemployment caused by the introduction of new machinery. Despite endemic violence, there was no organized police force. Murray does a wonderful job of bringing to life the era's notables--including Beau Brummel, Jane Austen, Wellington, Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Caroline Lamb--and observing the profligate spending habits and social inanities of the upper-crust British in the post-Waterloo era.

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From Library Journal

Murray (Castle Howard: The Life and Times of a Stately Home. o.p.) writes a solidly researched summary of the aristocracy of Regency England, which she dates from the French Revolution to the coming of Reform. Courtesans, dandies, scholars, and dissolute members of the royal family are described in detail. Murray deliberately ignores the underclass and focuses on the cream of the elite, the ton, giving prominent mention to the leading women of the period, including royal mistresses and the courtesans kept by the elite. Her work includes copious quotations, excellent period illustrations, and a good bibliography, though she assumes

more grasp of the period than most Americans are likely to have. In the United States, Murray's work would be especially useful to undergraduates studying British history. ?Susan A. Stussy, Bourbon Cty., KS
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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