



Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Power in a Gilded Age (Hardcover)

By Dr. Eric Homberger, Eric Homberger

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Mrs Astor, undisputed queen of New York society in the decades before World War I, used her prestige to create a social aristocracy in the city; an invitation to one of her parties was a coveted mark of social acceptance, and exclusion meant social banishment. Mrs Astor's story, which reads like a novel by Edith Wharton, sheds light on the origins, extravagant lifestyle, and social competitiveness of this aristocracy, and it is told here by Eric Homberger. Homberger argues that the arrival in New York of a tidal wave of new wealth after the Civil War pushed the city's old families into a redefinition of the practices and responsibilities of aristocracy. The public wanted to know more about the neighbourhoods, clothes, marriages, entertainments, scandals and divorces of the wealthy, so during the 1880s, Mrs Astor presided over a revolution in their social visibility. With Ward McAllister she created the Patriarchs, whose annual balls were the most sought-after social events of the time. She also established the "400", the definitive list of the socially acceptable, ordaining which families could be accepted and which must remain in social exclusion. Homberger describes the festivities of this social elite, their homes and environments, and their social struggles. His diverting account of lives of discreet and not-so-discreet excess recaptures New York's high society and shows how its members were transformed into America's first celebrities.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

New York scholar Homberger (*Scenes from the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York*) gathers a dog's breakfast of research into his latest exploration of the Big Apple. The result is an intriguing and curious volume that can't seem to decide whether it's a coffee table book or a study of the psychology of late 19th- and early 20th- century American aristocrats. The idea of an aristocracy emerging from a fervently democratic society is oxymoronic, as Homberger points out, but for over half a century New York's upper class was peculiarly concerned with such a hierarchy. Ward McAllister's "Patriarchs," considered to be the elite of New York society, and Mrs. Astor's list of "Four Hundred" were the bread and butter of this era's snobbery; the latter half of Homberger's book delves into McAllister's and Astor's lives, chronicling their cotillions, lunches, amusements and affairs with considerable relish. The slightly whimsical last chapter, "Being Mrs. Astor," which begins with a description of that lady's last years (spent planning parties that her doctors had instructed her servants not to hold, and making purchases merchants knew not to send to her house), may be the best part of Homberger's book. His skill for bringing to life characters of a century ago saves the book from the occasionally tedious specificity of earlier chapters, which seem to have gotten bogged down by admittedly impressive research in newspapers and other contemporary records. Illus. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

This history is a rare find—a book of sophisticated scholarship that also makes for entertaining reading. Homberger's (*The Historical Atlas of New York City*) descriptive account of aristocratic life in late 19th- and early 20th-century America is an attempt to deal in nonfiction with a subject he feels is mostly understood through novels. New York's aristocracy may have been newer and more fluid than that of other cities, but it was still "a great lumbering elephant of a social presence." Paradoxically, the wealth and power of the social elites resulted not in a sense of freedom but a strangling anxiety to conform to the narrow rules of correct behavior. Mrs. William Astor, a central player in New York's world of aristocratic excess, was an arbiter of social acceptability while also working to keep the undesirables in their place. Homberger takes us to the extravagant balls that defined the social season, develops the rise of the media involved with social life, and describes the elites' tony neighborhoods. All this occurs against the backdrop of a city teeming with poverty, as illustrated by Jacob Riis's influential pictorial, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Solidly researched and a delight to read, this book is recommended for public libraries and for academic libraries with collections in New York history.

Bonnie Collier, Yale Law Lib.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Although nineteenth-century New York was home to an established upper class, the absence of a hereditary gentry and the relative ease with which new fortunes were being made kept erstwhile aristocrats busy patrolling the boundaries of "society." This lively, if disjointed, history shows just how much energy was devoted to resisting the invasions of the nouveaux riches, and examines the complicated relationship between the upper class and the city it imagined it ruled. The book's real strength lies in its analysis of the post-Civil War era, when a flood of new money forced New York's more established families to look to the public arena as a place to assert their distinctiveness. Beginning in the eighteen-eighties, the members of the upper class chose to court the press, becoming stars of the "society page." Ironically, their increased fame served to weaken their independence, as they, like all celebrities, became subject to the vagaries of public interest.

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