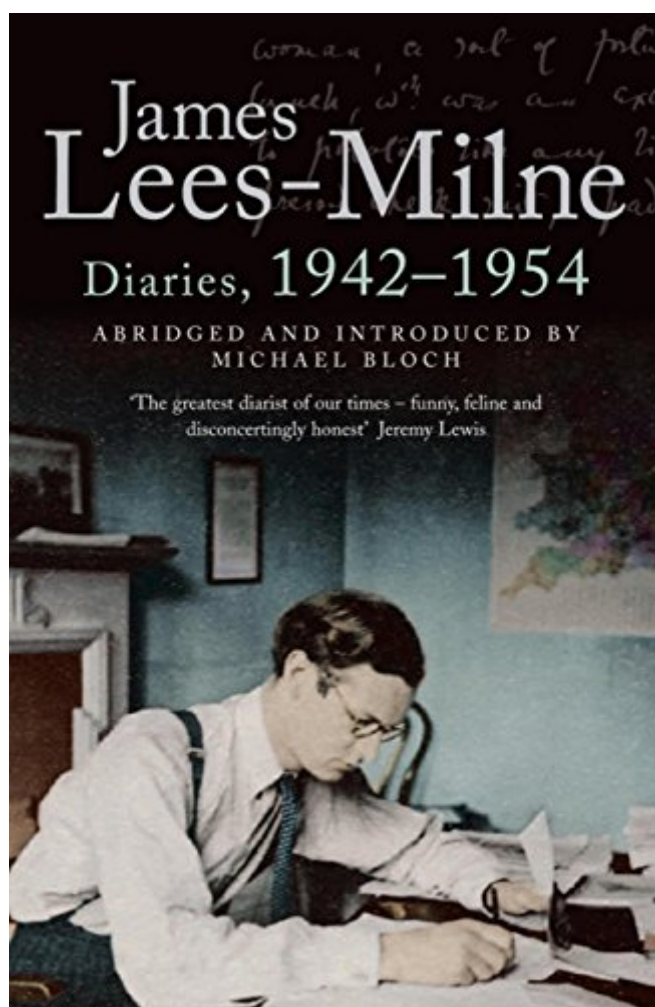


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Diaries, 1942-1954



Synopsis

The diaries of the National Trust's country house expert James Lees-Milne (1908-97) have been hailed as 'one of the treasures of contemporary English literature'. The first of three, this volume, which includes interesting material omitted when the diaries were originally published during the author's lifetime, covers the years 1942 to 1954, beginning with his wartime visits to hard-pressed country house owners, and ending with his marriage to the exotic Alvide Chaplin.

Book Information

File Size: 1317 KB

Print Length: 516 pages

Publisher: John Murray (December 8, 2011)

Publication Date: December 8, 2011

Language: English

ASIN: B006CUYTUY

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #1,378,686 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #12

inÂ Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Bloch #304

inÂ Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Historical Period > Modern & 20th

Century #6566 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural >

European > British & Irish

Customer Reviews

James Lees-Milne, like that other revered diarist from the mid-twentieth-century, Harold Nicolson (who was his friend), has come to be viewed as, if not one of the greatest British diarists of all times, then, certainly, as one of the wittiest and most entertaining. Unlike, Nicolson, though, Lees-Milne lived into the 'nineties. This volume is the reprint of his first diaries and is full to bursting with colorful anecdotes. Here's a sample: "Lord Esher is restless during weekends. Likes to talk. Never reads. Nevertheless is bubbling with fun and jokes; counting the cakes on the tea-table and calculating how many he may eat, and then gorging. Never walks a yard, saying we should hold Sir Edgar Bonham Carter, who was a rugger blue and is now a cripple, as a warning not on any account to

take exercise. Says he would rather remain in England and be atom-bombed into a jelly than emigrate to the colonies, blaze trails through the bushveld and be eaten by scorpions."Now some of you may wonder how you missed seeing the publication of this book. Simple. You live in the literary backwater of the United States and no publisher chose to pick it up. If you had bought it from .uk you would have been in luck. I highly recommend checking out 's sister website across the pond. There's a number of great books featured there, like this one, which are simply not available in the United States.

I've been reading some WWII war years diaries, not sure how I stumbled onto James Lees-Milne, perhaps through looking at books about English country houses. This is a terrific book, not only revealing about himself, but the commentary on the number of enormous homes owned by the gentry who can no longer afford them is a history lesson in itself. Lees-Milne evaluated these properties for possible acquisition by the National Trust, along with surrounding land to preserve the views, and the art and furnishings within. One thing that seemed missing was comment on hardships during the war. Because Lees-Milne was involved in meeting with landed gentry, he also knew people of high social standing. All through the war years there is much notation of dinner parties, teas, and comfortable social events, clearly a slice of English society wasn't suffering too much from wartime shortages. He doesn't comment on that -- maybe he should have. I enjoyed this so much, I ordered the biography Bloch wrote (he edited this diary condensation), and may get around to reading the other versions of the diary. If you're interested in the WWII era in England, country house architecture, and the end of the once-all-powerful aristocracy, you'll like this book. Also a fair amount of restrained comment on his affairs and quick liaisons with men. He must have been one of the first gay/bi diarists to remark upon these interludes and assert that it is not to be ashamed of. That was pretty clear thinking for 1940.

This diary, kept as the author worked for the National Trust in England during the Second World War, is a compulsive read, even for an American unfamiliar with many of the persons mentioned. I highly recommend it.

I have read all the diaries in the past but I purchased this compilation because new material was purportedly included - names of the living that had been excluded upon publication were not included since they were no longer alive. I find no better, livelier picture of British life in the war years than provided by Lees-Milne. He is the Pepys of our time - and the fact that he is chatty,

gossipy, yet brilliant in his portraits of people, the houses he evaluated for the National Trust - only makes for a marvelous mix of high and low information about that world. Yes, he can be a bit snobbish, and it amazes me how well he dined and in war torn blitz terrified England but all is forgiven when he evaluates the people he knows and the world around him. I love this book and encourage those who read it to buy the other, later diaries, although I do believe that the war years are the best.

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