



OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE... GROWING UP AT LEEDS CASTLE



For more than five hundred years Anthony Russell's (Temple 70) family has served the Kings and Queens of England as Ministers, Privy Counsellors, Generals and a Prime Minister. Here, he talks to Nigel Milne (Chandos 68) about his autobiography *Outrageous Fortune* in which he recounts his experience of growing up in the extraordinary atmosphere and surroundings of Leeds Castle, Kent.

NM Anthony, never having written a book myself, I am always in awe of those who have. What initially gave you the courage and confidence to begin?

AR: It was a very tentative start. Not a smidgeon of courage or confidence on the horizon. In fact, looking back I'm still a little bemused as to how a fondness for having the odd laugh with friends about my two grandmothers' eccentric exploits graduated to writing three or four vignettes of audience

pleasing tales about them. Quite a while afterwards, a Los Angeles literary agent was persuaded to read my stories and asked me to send her a manuscript. I was off to the races!

NM How did you find the whole process? Was it fun and totally absorbing or was it an arduous trial?

AR The 'arduous trial' element, curiously, never really played a part. In fact, as time went on, and each successive draft took on its new-and-improved status, the process of learning how to write a book – always moving in parallel with how to construct a book – became something of a challenge; absorbing, yes; hard work, for sure; extremely rewarding, for the most part. I wanted, needed, in fact, to see if I could do it; that is to say, complete the project to an editor's, publisher's and my satisfaction – and see the book into print.

NM I have often wondered about the whole process of writing a book. Having now done so, did you find it cathartic and did it allow you to re-evaluate the experiences of your early years?

AR I wish I could claim that there had been some cathartic element to the whole process – I worked sufficiently hard to merit, perhaps, some minor 'road to Damascus' experience, or revelation! – but what I actually discovered was somewhat more prosaic. Having accepted the challenge of writing *Outrageous Fortune*, it soon became apparent that I think about the people, places and events I was writing about in precisely the same way now as I did back then – with the caveat for modest growth in maturity! What made writing the book an

easier task than it might have been was the fact that all the introspection, and 'total recall', which was part of the process, never became a struggle to determine how best to evaluate situations, or problems; I just had to place bum in chair, write as well as I could and try not to be dull.

NM Writing an autobiography is a very brave thing to do in that one's reasons for doing it could be construed in a variety of ways. For instance, some might consider it an act of vain indulgence, whereas others will be delighted that one has opened up a world hitherto unknown, which is deeply fascinating. Have you experienced both reactions and what, may I ask, has been your immediate family's response to it?

AR Thank you – but I never thought writing about my childhood ("more spoiled than a Buckingham Palace corgi") was a bold step, other than attempting to achieve some small sense of gratification for a creative endeavour successfully concluded. I don't think I would have started the project if I had thought for a second my motives had been infiltrated by crude 'vain indulgence'. Opening up a world 'hitherto unknown' was far more the driving force behind my wishing to write the book. Did I think my story of childhood was interesting enough to write a book about? Of course! How many children grew up at Leeds Castle in the 1950s and 1960s where my grandmother, Lady Baillie, was one of the few owners of large estates in England still with the resources to operate at astonishing levels of grandeur? My immediate family's enthusiasm has been reserved but, in all fairness, I certainly wasn't expecting a chorus of 'All Hail!'

NM *The period you write about is quite emotive, with a way of life once commonplace amongst the higher echelons of society dwindling. Having been brought up on the cusp of this social advent, did you find it strange being partly a stalwart of a bygone era whilst also being firmly a child of the '60s?*

AR In the book I write, "We were fortunate. Thanks to the skill of her advisers (and, perhaps other indeterminate factors) Granny B's cocoon of wealth remained relatively intact. And so, from inside my gilded bubble, I observed and absorbed the revolution of Socialist Members of Parliament, rock stars and hairdressers, playwrights, theatre producers, movie stars, television personalities, photographers, fashion designers, models and footballers taking over Great Britain's airwaves and headlines, with my ears tuned in and an idealistic foot planted in two camps."

By the time I was old enough to have become fully aware of exactly how privileged my upbringing was, I had decided that the most important thing of all was to ignore it, discount it even, and envelop myself in the music, the 'vibrations' of the time. Whilst loving and admiring my mother for her style, manners and beauty, and Lord Margeson (my grandmother's best friend and Conservative Government Minister) for his old world charm and statuesque bearing, I was also immersing myself, luxuriating to the nth degree, in the outrageous cool of The Beatles, Stones, The Kinks and Cream. What seemed clear to me was that "all those new rich-and-famous Swinging Sixties superstars were, in fact, well on their way to establishing a new aristocracy. And the old aristocracy was so enamoured of this new one that it soon was hard to tell them apart as they swanned around in velvet suits and Cuban-heeled boots at country house weekend parties and fashionable London gatherings!"

I saw nothing strange in this transformation – in fact I revelled in it – apart from the fact that it was failing to register at the castle! My parents thought my obsession was bound to pass. It did not.

NM *Your reminiscences of your time at Stowe do not come across as your happiest. Stowe has always prided itself on encouraging and developing the individual and by your written account, it seems that your Housemaster let you down in this regard. Having said that, it can't have been all bad? What are your abiding happy memories of Stowe?*

AR The fact that I did not enjoy my time at Stowe can be attributed to a number of reasons which, if put to music, would merit being entitled 'the Whinge Symphony'. I shall not apportion blame beyond what I write about in the book – though I see it more as recounting rather than blaming. I do, of course, make it abundantly clear

that my views on Stowe have now changed dramatically, and for the good! My happy memories of Stowe, of which there are many, are centered around the friends I made – and still have – and the music which brought me so much joy.

NM *The massive popularity of the television series, Downton Abbey, has fed the public's insatiable nostalgia for, curiously, a period and lifestyle that they have never experienced themselves. Is it because there is something about such a grand, elegant and exquisitely mannered lifestyle that is at once comforting, reassuring, fascinating and so uniquely British that makes people wish to immerse themselves in films, plays and books such as Outrageous Fortune? Your book could not have come out at a better time! How do sales in Great Britain compare with those in the USA?*

AR I have lived in the US for a long time and it is clear that Downton Abbey fever is an established phenomenon, as in the UK and, I believe, in many other parts of the world. I don't know exactly what it is that makes normally calm and well-educated people go all askew over the frocks and mansions and servants and banter, but askew they go (myself included) and that's the way it is. It happened a long time ago with *Upstairs Downstairs*, with *Brideshead Revisited*, and now with *Downton*. There is, in the US, an abiding fascination with how the English upper classes, and those who work for them, have conducted themselves over history and I wonder if it's not because the revelation of what goes on behind the castle walls, both upstairs and down, is something very few people know about, but legions would like to. Add glorious production values, magnificent storytelling and the highest quality acting and you have a winning show. Of course, there is also the fact of us being historical cousins. Killjoys aside, the American fixation with our Royal Family (stratospheric when the Charles/Diana, William/Kate weddings hit the television screens) and all things stately-homeish, is something to cherish, and be grateful for, especially when uninspiring politicians on both sides of the pond seem to have lost their way entirely.

All I can hope is that *Outrageous Fortune* will benefit from the huge media exposure given to *Downton Abbey*. It's the real thing; forty years later. I have no sales figures at this time, and will not have for a while, according to my publishers.

NM *You have a very natural and conversational style of writing, Anthony, and whilst reading your book I really felt that it was as if you were reading it to me. Would you ever consider developing this style into a work of fiction, too?*

AR That is a wonderful compliment. Yes, I am done with writing about myself! I am working on a novel. It is a gentle satire.

I hope it will be amusing and relevant – critics like relevant! Assuredly, it will be written in the same style that you mention.

NM *Throughout your life, pop music has been a contributing factor to your overall happiness, whether in the listening to or the performing of it. What have been your most satisfactory moments and greatest regrets?*

AR Satisfactory moments have been many. So many I shall list just a few: my first guitar (1958): record collecting 1956-2013; the Beatles Christmas Show 1964; rehearsing and playing with my Stowe friends, Max, Oliver and Peter (1965-1969); playing in the London pubs and clubs and recording demos (1972-1976); recording and playing in Woodstock, NY (1977-1978); winning the Concours de Paris at the Théâtre de Champs-Élysées (1979); playing for audiences across Europe (1977-1980); my final recording (in honour of my mother who died in 2001), in 2003. All this encompasses a lot of happiness!

My greatest regret is failing my mother in her lifetime after she'd placed such faith in my coming through in the end. The music failed. The book worked. She only knew about the former.

NM *Several years ago you recorded an album of your own compositions and pretty impressive it is too. Can we expect more in the near future?*

AR Er, no! I'm so far past the sell-by date it's no laughing matter.

NM *Knowing you as I do, I am very aware that there is another autobiography inside you waiting to emerge! Shall we have to wait very long before OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE – THE ROCK AND ROLL YEARS is published?*

AR I'm afraid no such work is in the pipeline, nor is it ever likely to be. I have spent a considerable amount of time in the past with people who are well known, some very well known, but I would never contemplate writing about the times I spent with them, or the stories I know about them, because it would be the opposite of everything that I learned growing up regarding what's right and what's wrong. I'd prefer to write a bad sex novel than a follow-up memoir telling tales on the rich and famous that I knew.

NM *Rats!!! – Oh well, bring on the bad sex novel I say!*

Thank you, Anthony, for being a most delightful and entertaining interlocutor. I wish you tremendous success with the sales of Outrageous Fortune and may your fortune become increasingly outrageous!

Nigel Milne (Chandos 68)