The American Heiress

A Novel

“A wonderful, guilty pleasure of a read.”
—Amanda Foreman, author of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire

Daisy Goodwin
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Summary

Be careful what you wish for.

Traveling abroad with her mother at the turn of the twentieth century to seek a titled husband, beautiful, vivacious Cora Cash, whose family mansion in Newport dwarfs the Vanderbilts’, suddenly finds herself Duchess of Wareham, married to Ivo, the most eligible bachelor in England. Nothing is quite as it seems, however: Ivo is withdrawn and secretive, and the English social scene is full of traps and betrayals. Money, Cora soon learns, cannot buy everything, as she must decide what is truly worth the price in her life and her marriage.

Witty, moving, and brilliantly entertaining, Cora’s story marks the debut of a glorious storyteller who brings a fresh new spirit to the world of Edith Wharton and Henry James. (From the publisher.)

Author Bio

• Birth—December 19, 1961
• Where—England, UK
• Education—B.A., Cambridge University; Columbia University Film School
• Currently—lives in London, England

Daisy Georgia Goodwin is a British television producer, poetry anthologist and novelist.

Having attended Westminster School and Queen's College, London (another fee paying school, not a university), Goodwin studied history at Trinity College at Cambridge, and attended Columbia Film School before joining the BBC as a trainee arts producer in 1985.

In 1998 she moved to Talkback Productions as head of factual programmes, and in 2005 founded Silver River Productions. Her first novel, My Last Duchess, was published in the UK in August 2010 and, under the title The American Heiress, in the U.S. and Canada in June 2011.

She has also published eight poetry anthologies and a memoir entitled Silver River, and was chairman of the judging panel for the 2010 Orange Prize for women's fiction. She has presented television shows including Essential Poems (To Fall In Love With) (2003) and Reader, I Married Him (2006).

Goodwin is married to Marcus Wilford, an ABC TV executive; they have two daughters. She appeared as
Discussion Questions

1. What is your initial impression of Cora Cash? How does she develop as a person in the course of the novel?

2. In America, Cora is clearly at the top of society, while Bertha is very near the bottom. In what ways do their circumstances change when they move to England?

3. What role do the mothers in the story—Mrs. Cash, Mrs. Van Der Leyden, and the Double Duchess—play in the central characters’ lives?

4. Cora is always aware that “no one was unaffected by the money.” How does the money affect Cora herself? What are the pleasures and perils of great wealth?

5. What is your opinion of Teddy and the Duke? What about Charlotte?

6. What do you think about Cora’s decision at the end of the book? Would you have made the same choice? (The author has said she was of two minds up until the last chapter.)

7. What are the differences between the Old World and the New in the novel? Do both worlds seem remote in the twenty-first century, or do you see parallels to contemporary society?

8. Why do modern readers enjoy reading novels about the past? Take a moment to discuss your experiences as a reader of historical fiction, in general, and of The American Heiress in particular.

9. When she was chair of the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2010, Daisy Goodwin wrote a controversial essay lamenting the “unrelenting grimness” of so many of the novels and pointing out that “generally great fiction contains light and shade”—not only misery but joy and humor. What do you think about Daisy’s argument that “it is time for publishers to stop treating literary fiction as the novelistic equivalent of cod-liver oil: if it’s nasty it must be good for you”?

10. Kirkus Reviews called The American Heiress a “shrewd, spirited historical romance with flavors of Edith Wharton, Daphne du Maurier, and Jane Austen.” Other critics have also seen echoes of Henry James. If you have read any of these earlier novelists, what parallels and differences do you see in Daisy’s work?

(Questions by publisher.)
My Last Duchess by Daisy Goodwin

My Last Duchess, or The American Heiress in the US Edition, is the story of Cora Cash, an American heiress who marries an English duke at the end of the nineteenth century. Most of my characters are fictional but I have used a few real life characters such as the Prince of Wales.

The 1890’s

My Last Duchess is set in the 1890’s, the decade that saw the rise of Sherlock Holmes, the trial sofa Oscar Wilde and the great bicycling craze. Queen Victoria had been on the throne for sixty years and her son the Prince of Wales was eating his way through three thirteen course meals a day.

Britain was going through an agricultural depression and its great landowning aristocracy were hit by declining incomes and the new inheritance tax ‘death duties’.

On the other side of the Atlantic fortunes were being made every day and the new American millionaires were coming East to buy themselves the best of what the Old World had to offer.

Consuelo Vanderbilt

Consuelo Vanderbilt

My heroine Cora Cash is loosely based on Consuelo Vanderbilt, the beautiful American heiress who married the 10th Duke of Marlborough in 1895.

Consuelo was forced into this marriage by her domineering mother Alva who longed for the social cachet that being the mother of a Duchess would bring her.

The marriage was not a happy one. On the honeymoon, Consuelo told her new husband that she was in love with somebody else, “So am I” he replied.
American heiresses on the look out for a title could consult a quarterly periodical called the Titled American which listed all the American women who had married titled foreigners and gave a list of eligible titled bachelors together with their address, the size of their estate and the size of their debts.

**Tattoos**

One of the most fascinating things I came across in my research was the fashion for tattoos among the aristocracy in the late nineteenth century. It started when the future George V and his brother went round the world by sea and came back with a rich assortment of tattoos. Their father the Prince of Wales followed suit and so did many of his friends.

There is a rumour that all the Prince’s ‘special’ lady friends had a snake tattooed around their wrist, a detail I used in my depiction of the Double Duchess, the Duke’s glamorous and manipulative mother.

**Fashion**

Parisian fashion 19th Century

Cora has a fabulous wardrobe courtesy of M.Worth in Paris. The House of Worth was the place to buy your clothes at the end of the nineteenth century. An heiress like Cora would go to Paris once or maybe twice a year and come back with sixty or seventy dresses – each one would be sent over in its own specially designed trunk.

Any socially ambitious woman would rather stay at home than be seen twice in the same dress. The 1890’s was the time of hugely exaggerated leg o’mutton sleeves and tiny waists. Some of the sleeves were so wide that women had to turn sideways to walk through doorways.

**Money**

If you were an impoverished english aristocrat than marrying an American heiress was nice work if you could get it. Consuelo Vanderbilt’s dowry was worth $100 million dollars in today’s money, Mary Leiter brought a dowry worth $50 million to her marriage to George Curzon.
About a quarter of the British aristocracy married into American money. The endless summer of the Edwardian aristocracy was largely paid for by American money.

**Houses**

Cora Cash lives in New York and Newport. The houses she lives in are vast, grandiose piles with every modern convenience. But when she goes to live at Lulworth Castle she discovers to her horror that there are no bathrooms, let alone central heating. Life in the English country house for a rich American girl was seriously uncomfortable. One American heiress who married Lord Stonor refused all dinner invitations because she simply couldn’t face taking off her furs.

My heroine is horrified that every time she wants to have a bath, a housemaid has to carry several gallons of hot water up from the kitchen half a mile away. The Americans loved the look of the stately home but they weren’t prepared to adopt the stiff upper lip needed to live in them.
Cash for titles: The Billion-dollar ladies

By Daisy Goodwin
14 August 2010

For daughters of the new American billionaires of the 19th century, it was the ultimate deal: marriage to a cash-strapped British aristocrat in return for a title and social status. But money didn’t always buy them happiness, says Daisy Goodwin

In 1895 when Consuelo Vanderbilt, the daughter of the American billionaire Willie Vanderbilt, married Sunny, Duke of Marlborough, in New York, the wedding was the media event of the year; the closest modern equivalent would be Prince Harry marrying Paris Hilton. Three hundred policemen were employed outside the church to hold back the thousands of onlookers desperate to catch a glimpse of the glamorous bride in the dress with the five-yard train.
The Duke of Marlborough, above right, married millionairess Consuelo Vanderbilt so he could preserve the family seat Blenheim Palace, below.

Details of the wedding were reported on the front page of The New York Times, and Vogue devoted pages to the bride’s trousseau, describing everything down to the white brocade corset, which had gold clasps studded with diamonds. Consuelo carried orchids which had been grown in the greenhouses of Blenheim Palace and shipped over to New York in a specially refrigerated chamber, because Marlborough brides always carried flowers from Blenheim. The presents were displayed for the public, as they are at royal weddings today, and the queue to admire the gifts – which included a string of pearls once owned by Catherine the Great – stretched halfway down Fifth Avenue.
When I borrowed the detail about the bouquet being brought over for my novel My Last Duchess, which tells the story of one of these transatlantic marriages, my editor said, ‘This can’t possibly be true.’ In fact, you would need a vivid imagination to match the real excesses of the Gilded Age.

**It was the media event of the year: the 19th-century equivalent of Prince Harry marrying Paris Hilton**

The second half of the 19th century was the time when the American billionaire was created – men like Cornelius Vanderbilt, Consuelo’s great-grandfather, who made a fortune out of railways; Andrew Carnegie, whose empire was built on steel, and Isaac Singer, who built the first commercially successful sewing machine. These men were rolling in ready money, unlike the English aristocracy, who were land rich but cash poor and whose income dwindled every year thanks to the agricultural depression and the new death duties.

Consuelo was the most famous of the ‘dollar princesses’ – the fabulously rich daughters of these billionaires who came to England looking for the one thing they couldn’t buy at home: a title. In 1895 alone, nine American heiresses married members of the English aristocracy, and by the end of the century a quarter of the House of Lords had a transatlantic connection.

Even Princess Diana had an American great-grandmother. It was a straightforward economic exchange: American girls got to be aristocrats and impoverished peers got the money to mend their stately homes. Mary Leiter, who married Lord Curzon, had a dowry of £1.5 million as the daughter of a wealthy department store owner from Chicago – that’s about £50 million in today’s money. And Consuelo’s dowry was double that.
George Curzon, centre, married American heiress Mary Leiter, left, in 1895; their home, Kedleston Hall, was the largest private house in England, right.

Transatlantic matches became so much the rage among the newly rich that a whole industry sprang up to serve their needs, including professional matchmakers and magazines. Typically, the American heiress would start by consulting the quarterly publication *The Titled American*: a list of American ladies who have married foreigners of rank.

This contained a register of all the eligible titled bachelors still on the market, with a handy description of their age, accomplishments and prospects – for example: *The Marquess of Winchester is the fifteenth Marquess and Premier Marquess in the Peerage of Great Britain. He is also the Hereditary Bearer of the Cap of Maintenance. The entailed estates amount to 4,700 acres, yielding an income of $22,000. He is 32 years of age, and a captain of the Coldstream Guards.*

**Family seat: Amport House, Hampshire**  
From *The Titled American No 2 March 1890*

This 19th-century version of match.com was in great demand in the Fifth Avenue and Newport mansions where these American heiresses lived. Many came from families whose wealth was very recent, and who were desperate to stand out in a famously snobbish New York society where mere money was no guarantee of acceptance. The upper echelon, known famously as The Four Hundred, was based on the number of people who could fit comfortably into Mrs Astor’s ballroom – Mrs Astor being the most powerful woman in New York society on account of both her breeding and her fabulous wealth.
Young women such as Winaretta Singer, the sewing machine heiress, were snubbed by the likes of Mrs Astor, but when she went to Europe and married the French Prince de Polignac, she was at last admitted into Mrs Astor’s sanctum. Similarly, Jennie Jerome, the daughter of a New York real-estate developer, was never quite considered respectable, but upped her status considerably when she married Lord Randolph Churchill, the brother of the Duke of Marlborough. She went on to become one of the most famous women in Britain for her beauty, her political activities, and her second marriage to a man half her age, as well as being the mother of Winston Churchill.

Then there was Minnie Stevens. She was not received in New York society because rumour had it that her mother had once been a chambermaid in her father’s hotel. But in England she married into the aristocracy, becoming Minnie Paget, and quickly secured her place in society with close personal friends including the Prince of Wales.

**Perhaps the most successful heiress was Nancy Astor, who became the first woman MP to take up her seat in the House of Commons**

Minnie became well known as a broker of these high-profile international marriages, and Consuelo Vanderbilt was one of the girls who benefited from Minnie’s connections. Indeed, Consuelo’s mother Alva was so sure that Minnie would find her daughter a titled man that she ordered her trousseau from the Parisian dressmaker M Worth six months before Consuelo had even met the Duke of Marlborough.
Like today’s Park Avenue princesses, American young women were famously more smartly dressed than their English counterparts. An heiress would order at least 90 dresses a season, most of which were worn once. English ladies were shocked by their conspicuous consumption and by the way unmarried American girls would wear ‘their diamonds in the daytime and sables every day’, as one dowager put it.

British men seemed to have no such misgivings.

English society resented the way the Prince of Wales, Queen Victoria’s oldest son, was so keen on the interlopers. But he defended his choice saying, ‘American girls are livelier, better educated, and less hampered by etiquette. They are not so squeamish as their English sisters and they are better able to take care of themselves.’ The prince, or Bertie as he was known, almost certainly had an affair with Jennie Churchill and was friendly with a number of the dollar princesses.

Bertie once said to Winston Churchill, ‘If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t be here’ – the implication being that without Bertie’s patronage, a British aristocrat such as Lord Randolph Churchill would not have married a mere American like Jennie Jerome. As Jennie says in her memoirs in 1910, ‘Thirty years ago, in England as well as on the Continent, the American woman was looked upon as a strange abnormal creature with habits and manners something between a Red Indian and a Gaiety Girl.’

But while these marriages may have kept the stately homes of England in good repair and satisfied the social ambitions of the bride’s mothers, the heiresses frequently paid a high price for their title. They often found themselves isolated and miserable in a great pile of a house, miles from anywhere, with no heating apart from open fires and – horror of horrors – no bathrooms.

Mary Leiter, on marrying Lord Curzon, was staggered to find that she was expected to bathe in a tin hip bath which was filled with hot water brought up by a housemaid from the boiler in the kitchen. To American women used to hot showers and steam heating, these conditions felt primitive. Cornelia Martin, who married the Earl of Craven, complained to her mother, ‘The house is so cold that the only time I take my furs off is when I go to bed.’ Mildred Sherman from Ohio, who became Lady Camoys, gave up going to dinner at country houses because she couldn’t withstand the Arctic temperatures in an evening dress.

**English ladies were shocked by the way unmarried American girls would wear ‘their diamonds in the daytime and sables every day'**

Then there was the problem of the servants who resented these American upstarts who had no idea of tradition and hierarchy. Consuelo recalls asking the butler to light the fire in the drawing room. The butler looked at her in horror and told her that he would send for the footman. ‘He was deeply shocked that I would ask him to perform so menial a task,’ she says in her memoirs.
She found Blenheim, the palace built for the first Duke of Marlborough, uncomfortable and unwelcoming: ‘From my window I overlooked a pond in which a former butler had drowned himself. As one gloomy day succeeded another I began to feel a deep sympathy for him.’

Consuelo’s marriage was particularly unhappy. Blackmailed by her social-climbing mother into giving up the man she loved in favour of the duke, she was horrified when, on her honeymoon, the duke told her that he ‘never wanted to marry her either’. He was in love with someone else, but needed Consuelo’s fortune to keep Blenheim going. Consuelo did her duty and produced two sons, ‘an heir and a spare’, but the couple were never happy and began to live apart as soon as they decently could. They were eventually divorced in 1921.

Not all of these marriages were loveless, though. Mary Leiter fell in love with the Hon George Curzon the moment she saw him. On the day they met, she wrote to a friend, ‘I will have him, because I believe he needs me. I have no shame.’ She fended off all her other suitors, who were numerous, as she was as beautiful as she was rich, in the hope that Curzon would propose, which he did two years later. She had been right, he did need her, not only to keep up Kedleston Hall, the largest private house in England, but also to finance his political career.

Jennie Jerome, right, married Lord Randolph Churchill
A young Winston Churchill, right, the future British Prime Minister, with his mother the Lady Jennie Jerome, and his brother Lord Randolph Churchill, left

In 1898, Curzon was made Viceroy of India, making Mary Vicereine (literally, deputy queen), the highest-ranking American in the history of the British Empire. She loved the power that the title gave her, but she was also a fantastically loyal, Sarah Brown-like political wife, standing by her husband through his disastrous, self-imposed second term as viceroy, from which he was forced to resign in 1905. She died – possibly of exhaustion – the following year.

One of the most successful of the transatlantic marriages was that of May Goelet, an American heiress who, after flirting with most of the British aristocrats listed in Burke’s Peerage, finally settled on the Duke of Roxburghe in 1903. This duke was careful to stress that he had money of his own. ‘I am no fortune hunter,’ he told reporters. ‘I am merely an Englishman who believes in American institutions!’ – although the bride’s vast dowry undoubtedly helped that belief.

May Roxburghe, in turn, enjoyed being treated like royalty. When she and her husband returned from their honeymoon to his family seat on the Scottish Borders, they were greeted at Floors Castle by 100 torch-bearers and a band of pipers. She redecorated the castle in deluxe American style and settled down to a happy life growing carnations and doing good works among the villagers. The only problem was her failure to produce an heir. After ten childless years, the duke and duchess went to visit a specialist in Vienna, promising him £1,000 if he could help them conceive, and double that if the child was a boy.

The doctor apparently did nothing more to earn his fee than advise the duchess to give up sugar, but the Marquess of Bowmont was born a year later, in 1913. His birth was marked by a chain of bonfires along the Borders of Scotland, lit by jubilant tenants, relieved that the Goelet money would stay in the Roxburghe family.

But perhaps the most successful American woman of all was Nancy Langhorne Shaw, who married William Waldorf Astor, a member of the Anglicised branch of the Astor family. She was a divorcée from Virginia, who met her future husband on the hunting field and went on to become the political hostess of her generation and the first woman MP to take up her seat in the
House of Commons. Nancy Astor was teetotal and a Christian Scientist, but she changed the face of British politics by showing that women could perform as well as men in parliament.

After the First World War everything changed, and by the 1940s American heiresses such as Barbara Hutton rejected impoverished aristocrats in favour of movie stars like Cary Grant. Titles were suddenly not as sexy to them as worldwide fame and leading-man good looks.

But the 30-odd years when the dollar princesses brought something like $25 billion into the British economy preserved many of the stately homes we visit today and produced two of the most famous Britons of the 20th century: Winston Churchill and Princess Diana. Not bad for girls who, when they first entered British society, were asked whether they wore their native Red Indian costume on special occasions.

Read more: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-1302195/Cash-titles-The-Billion-dollar-ladies.html#ixzz1vcoqGK7b