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# The Astors

*Virginia Cowles*

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*Virginia Cowles*

**The Astors** Virginia Cowles

**The Astors; whose immense fortune came from furs, ships, and real estate; whose mansions bejewelled Fifth Avenue, Newport, and England; who became leaders — first in America, then in Britain — of polite society; whose births and deaths, private feuds and public scandals, political ambitions and philanthropic munificence have fascinated the rest of the world for close to two centuries.**

The story of their rise to prominence, of their long reign, of their influence and importance, is more than the saga of a rich and unusual family, for it illuminates from a unique vantage point the history of the past two hundred years.

When twenty-year-old John Jacob Astor arrived in icebound Baltimore from Germany in 1783, his ambition was to live comfortably from the sale of musical instruments.

At his death in 1848, he was the richest man in America — he ruled over an empire and had founded a dynasty.

Today's generation of Astors, still wealthy, lead influential but less flamboyant lives than their predecessors — as modest businessmen, horse breeders, playboys, philanthropists, novelists.

But between them and their ancestor John Jacob — who had spent his early years trudging along Indian trails bartering for furs and his last fourteen years quadrupling his fortune many times over on Manhattan real estate and rentals — lies a peerless array of characters, social and political forces in their own times, whose power and prestige continue to be felt today.

There was William Backhouse Astor, frugal and sombre, who loathed social gatherings. There was the Southerner Charlotte Augusta, who during the Civil War raised and equipped a regiment of black soldiers to fight for the North.

There was Caroline Astor, who gave balls costing as much as $200,000.

There was the vindictive, prickly William Waldorf Astor, who unsuccessfully ran for Congress.

There was an Astor feud settled only by the prospect of financial gain with the creation of the Waldorf-Astoria, designed to bring exclusiveness to the masses, a "glittering incandescent fantasy".

And there was Nancy Astor, vociferous Member of Parliament and leader of the Cliveden Set.

From the free-wheeling entrepreneurial days of the early nineteenth century through two world wars to today, the Astors have been in the forefront of their age, both here and abroad, luminaries of politics, society, and culture.

Through five generations, in all their splendour, in a richly anecdotal narrative interwoven with paintings, drawings, and photographs making vivid the people, their mansions, their rise to social prominence in the United States and in England, here then are The Astors.

Virginia Cowles (1910-1983) was an author and journalist. Born in Vermont, USA she became a well-known journalist in the 1930s with her columns appearing on both sides of the Atlantic. During the Second World War she covered the Italian campaign, the liberation of Paris, and the Allied invasion of Germany. In 1945 she married the politician and writer Aidan Crawley. She wrote many biographies including Winston Churchill; the Era and the Man and Edward VII and His Circle.

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