

The West End Front: Wartime Secrets of London's Grand Hotels, by Matthew Sweet.

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When people think back to wartime London, the images that often come to mind are of ration books, long queues, and underground stations where men, women, and children huddled together against the cold and the bombs. Distinctions of class and wealth were forgotten as the 'Blitz Spirit' saw the nation pull together to defend itself. However, by telling the story of life in the grand hotels at this time in *The West End Front: Wartime Secrets of London's Grand Hotels*, Matthew Sweet highlights that for those who could afford it, the slogan 'Keep Calm and Carry On' carried far more weight than 'Dig for Victory' or 'Make Do and Mend'. In *The West End Front* Sweet draws attention to an aspect of life on the Home Front that might otherwise be overlooked, and, in analysing the wartime secrets of upstairs, downstairs, and outside on the picket lines, he provides a broad narrative and makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of the social history of the Second World War.

Fundamentally, *The West End Front* is an examination of twentieth century class, social, and gender relations and how they responded to the pressures - and freedoms - of total war. It provides a unique insight into wartime London. In the chapter "Reds", Sweet details the almost unbelievable conditions endured by the inhabitants of the East End during the first few weeks of the Blitz, when they, unlike the more fortunate residents of the grand hotels, did not have effective air-raid shelters. The personal recollections of a number of hotel staff who found themselves detained during the war under regulation 18B of the Emergency Powers Act are also brought to light in the chapter "Aliens". In "Parents", he explains how hotel rooms were put to use as illegal abortion clinics and later

goes on to discuss sexual relations and politics in wartime London hotels. These brief examples illustrate the scope of *The West End Front*.

Sweet has compiled a wide range of stories and experiences and uses them to reconstruct this brief and distinctive moment in history. However, it is a series of personal histories and therefore cannot be considered a truly academic text. There is no scholarly argument which links the framework of the book together and although this can be interpreted as a disadvantage for the text as a whole, the lack of intellectual interpretation allows the 'real' thread of Sweet's work to become clear. This thread is the overwhelming sense of sympathy and humanity with which the author writes. *The West End Front* is an emotive work that confronts the reader with issues of integrity, morality, poverty, and greed. Although *The West End Front* may not alter or re-define our interpretation of the Second World War, this is not the intention of the work and it would be wrong to critique it in such a way. It does, however, further our understanding of this time period in an interesting and thought-provoking manner.

The narration moves seamlessly between time and place, from blitzed London streets filled with protesters, to present-day cafes and back again as if the two were somehow joined together. In this way, Sweet is writing a living history. He aims to bring the wartime past, with its glittering ballrooms, illicit affairs, domineering aristocrats, and the Special Operations Executive agents back to life. These grand hotels are not just monuments to class privilege, they are monuments to the people who have given them life and *The West End Front* is a testament to this.

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