

EDWINA MOUNTBATTEN:  
A LIFE OF HER OWN

Janet Morgan

Charles Scribner's Sons/489 pages/\$22.95

reviewed by ARAM BAKSHIAN, JR.

The idle rich are bad enough, but they pale by comparison to the hyperactive rich. Even aside from their insufferable obtrusiveness, the hyperactive rich do a hell of a lot more harm than their quiescent cousins. Consider Edwina Mountbatten: had she spent the balance of her adult life as she began it—as a spoiled, self-indulgent society beauty with a few minor neuroses and a keen appetite for adultery—no one would have been the worse for it. Certainly no one outside her own circle of equally spoiled Jazz Age sybarites, none of whom would have been missed. Instead, driven perhaps by the boredom inherent in marriage to one of the most self-absorbed, oblivious stuffed-shirts of the century, Edwina reached out and tried to live a meaningful life. She really should have stayed in bed . . . where she was so much more at home.

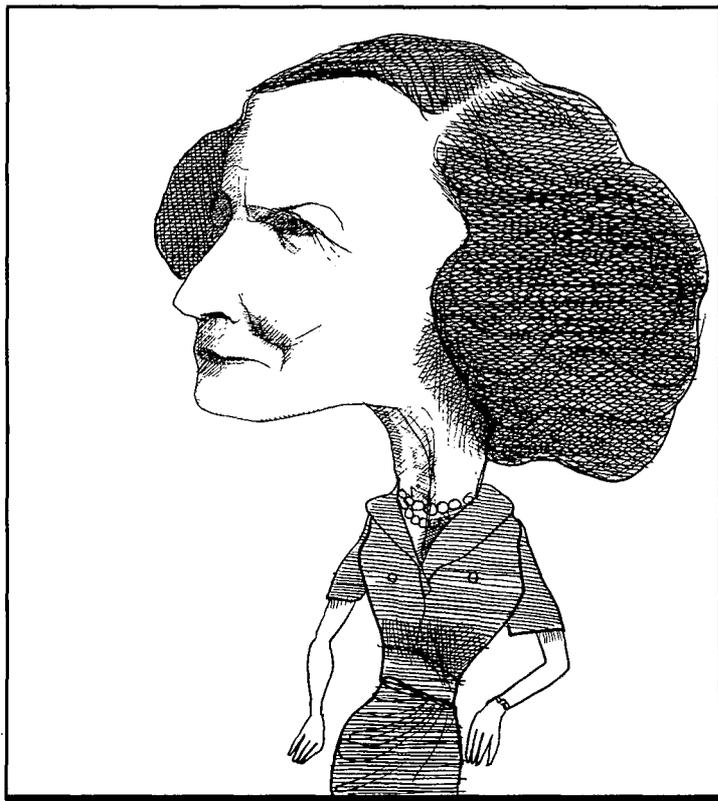
True, in her attempts to raise her own civic consciousness, Edwina Mountbatten did perform a few genuinely good works, especially in volunteer nursing and refugee assistance. But one must remember that her husband's dubious handiwork as a commander during World War II, and as imperial tribune afterwards, kept her well supplied with wounded and displaced persons.

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Whatever Edwina's good works, they were more than overbalanced by her own and her husband's incredibly smug, bungled performance as the last Viceroy and Vicereine of British India. With the cool command and steady self-assurance of those to the manor born, the Mountbattens managed to make a bad situation even worse. But they did so with such aplomb that they exited, albeit over a carpet of corpses, to nearly universal applause. If any proof were needed of Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee's political cunning, the choice of this fashionable aristocratic couple to cover Britain's headlong retreat from Empire provides it. The fact that it added to the suffering of the ruled and further stained

the honor of the rulers is a matter of history; in no way does it diminish the political astuteness of the move.

At times, statesmanship spills over into soap opera. Edwina's headlong infatuation with Jawaharlal Nehru was the talk of British India while it was going on and has since been substantiated by published diaries, correspondence, and the recollections of eyewitnesses. Whether it was carnal or merely gooey, this affair hopelessly prejudiced the atmosphere of the talks that led up to partition. Edwina's enthusiasm for Nehru and her sway over her husband further convinced Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the prickly leader of the Muslim League, that justice was not to be had and that a separate homeland, Pakistan, was the only answer for Indian Muslims. Whether or not he was right at the time, most of India's surviving Muslim minority has indeed been consigned to second-class political and economic status in an India dominated by the Congress party. The party, in turn, remains the virtual monopoly of upper-caste Hindus who, even when not religious, often harbor lingering resentment against a Muslim minority that conquered India under the Moghuls and played a role disproportionate to its numbers in the British Indian Army.



But never fear: readers will not be troubled unduly with discussions of such issues in Janet Morgan's new biography of Edwina Mountbatten. Affairs of the boudoir take precedence over affairs of state; parties, weddings, wardrobes, and royal and society gossip predominate. Still, there is the occasional revelation. For the sort of person interested in learning that the young Dickie Mountbatten nicknamed his future wife's breasts "Mutt and Jeff"—not, one hopes, due to disparate dimensions—Miss Morgan's lengthy but rather trivial book should prove rewarding reading.

It's all here . . . what there is of it, that is. Despite the subtitle "A Life of Her Own," Edwina Mountbatten's life was led very much in tandem

with her husband's. The Mountbattens' joint existence—numerous adulteries aside—was one of those calculated, professionally bound affairs one often encounters with husband-and-wife team efforts in the baser arts and crafts (London composer-lyricists, Washington politician-hostess matches, and New York tycoon-socialites and agent-author Couples-from-Hell).

The Mountbatten marriage was a concoction of convenience, based on a joint thirst for fame and symbiotic rather than shared skills. Edwina had beauty and money, but was the granddaughter of a German-born millionaire of Jewish ancestry, Sir Ernest Cassel; whenever she did something shocking or slightly louche in later life, "people would observe that she was, after all, only partly English." Dickie was the scion of a European princely house with long bloodlines and short pockets. His close ancestral and personal ties to the House of Windsor guaranteed him a leg up at court and in military circles, once he could meet expenses. Because of his high hopes and pinched circumstances, the marriage converted Edwina from his fiancée to his financier, as one of Dickie's most heartfelt—and transparent—expressions of early marital affection bears out. Without Edwina's help, he gratefully acknowledged, he "would have no polo ponies."

Appropriately, they spent part of their honeymoon in Hollywood and, not surprisingly, Edwina soon sought consolation in the arms of a succession of more ardent lovers, while continuing to bankroll Dickie's career in the Royal Navy . . . along with numerous, oft-wrecked Rolls-Royces, yachts, and other costly goodies. Dickie seems to have driven with the same reckless abandon he later demonstrated when sending men into battle; the Mountbattens' peacetime motoring is a gory chronicle of overturned pig carts and squashed dogs on the Continent, and bus collisions in Knightsbridge back in London.

**T**he more closely one studies this shiny, shallow couple, the less there is to make of them. In fairness to Edwina, she at least emerges as less of a snob and poseur than her husband. When, in later life, she took on real humanitarian and charitable responsibilities, for example, she never sought publicity, and devoted her considerable ener-

gies and not inconsiderable pushiness to achieving results. Dickie, on the other hand, always kept at least one eye on the galleries.

Thus, when Edwina died suddenly, of heart failure, in 1960, he was genuinely grief-stricken. Within twenty-four hours of her death, however, he gloated in his diary over the "fantastic BBC, TV and newspaper coverage," and hundreds of "telegrams and letters from Presidents, Kings, Prime Ministers, Ambassadors, Commanders-in-Chief and organizations." Vice Admiral Manley Power, one of Mountbatten's last commanding offi-

cers, later reminisced that "I found him an endless source of entertainment with his peacock mountbankery which kept popping up at unexpected moments in sharp contrast to his normal sane and statesmanlike person."

One suspects that Edwina felt much the same way. Marriage to such a man precluded a full "life of her own," but his very superficiality left her enough space on the margin to prove herself a deeper, potentially more interesting person than her exploded (in the end, quite literally, thanks to IRA terrorists) myth of a husband. □

## THE JORDAN RULES: THE INSIDE STORY OF A TURBULENT SEASON WITH MICHAEL JORDAN AND THE CHICAGO BULLS

Sam Smith

Simon and Schuster/333 pages/\$22

reviewed by FRED BARNES

**P**hil Jackson, the coach of the Chicago Bulls, is a sixties person. He's liberal, an admirer of Native American culture, antiwar. Desert Storm got to him. He desperately wanted to vent his feelings against the war, but not in public. He decided his team—ten blacks, two whites—was the only forum left to him. So he raised the issue at a practice one afternoon as American ground troops raced through Kuwait and on to Iraq. "Who wants the troops to go into Baghdad and go after Hussein?" he asked. Most of the players were all for it, especially the stars of the team, Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, and Horace Grant. A backup player, Craig Hodges, a Muslim, was strongly opposed. Jackson wound up lecturing his players, insisting the war would leave a residue of anti-Americanism with Iraqis. It might spur terrorism, he said. The Sears Tower in downtown Chicago might be blown up, killing thousands.

I mention this anecdote because it  
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was exactly the kind of tidbit I was looking for in *The Jordan Rules*, a riveting account of a professional basketball team's championship season. Now, I know what you're thinking. What difference does it make how a bunch of basketball players and their coach felt about the Persian Gulf war? None, really. Except that it helps to flesh out the personality of a team that captured the nation's attention in 1991 by whipping Magic Johnson and the Los Angeles Lakers four games to one for the NBA title. That's what you want in a good sports book: the behind-the-scenes stuff, a peek at the private side of the players, their hobbies and politics and religion, the way they get along or don't. Of course, all these trivialities have to contribute to the larger theme, namely how the team won. And in *The Jordan Rules*, they do, which is why the book is a bestseller and deserves to be.

**T**here's a name for books of this genre, a name my wife says is too vulgar to repeat. In any case, this one rises above the genre. I think