



Oh, to Be in Graceland . . .

by Stuart Reid

“**N**ow this is really wonderful. This is something else.” The auto dealer from Leesburg, Virginia, stood in the middle of the State Dining Room at Buckingham Palace with his head back and his hands on his hips. He was in his thirties and wore black pants, black sneakers, a black polo shirt, and a red windbreaker tied by its sleeves round his middle. He grinned with pleasure. “Have you ever been to Graceland?” he asked. “I mean I’m not saying that Graceland is anything like as good as this—don’t get me wrong—but you know . . .”

I knew. The State Dining Room is a riot of red plush, not quite as overpowering as the Throne Room, with its seven dazzling glass and gilt bronze chandeliers, but powerful enough nonetheless to bring on an acid flashback in an unsuspecting baby-boomer. It seems to be especially popular—along with the equally violent Green Drawing Room (green walls, red carpet, more strobe chandeliers)—with young men in tank tops, crew cuts, and mustaches. Not that the Virginian was one of those (or them). Certainly not. “From a *masculine* point of view,” he said soon after I had accosted him at the entrance of the Palace, “Diana is a very attractive woman. Know what I’m saying?” Oh, absolutely.

The fact is, though, the palace is a queen’s paradise. True, the Queen herself is said not to like the place, but there can be no doubt that Liberace would have loved it. And so would have the King himself. Krystle Carrington, on the other hand, would have called in the decorators, and demanded something a little more restrained, a little more in keeping with the essential dignity of man.

Buckingham Palace, which opened its doors to the public (at £8 a head) at the beginning of August and closed them at the end of September (when the Queen returned from her summer vacation in

Scotland), has never been much admired by the smart set. In 1836 the diarist Thomas Creevey was given a tour, and sniffed: “It has cost a million of money,” he wrote, “and there is not a fault that has not been committed in it. . . . The costly ornaments of the State Dining Room exceeded all belief in their bad taste—raspberry pillars without end that make you quite sick to look at.”

It was not always thus. What is now the Queen’s official residence is a parvenu among palaces. It was bought by George III, last King of America, in 1762, when it was still the handsome and relatively modest brick-and-stone mansion that had been built for the Duke of Buckingham in 1702. John Adams, as the first American Minister to Great Britain, noted in 1783 that it was “without the smallest affectation, ostentation, profusion or meanness.” The rot set in during the reigns of George IV and William IV, when work began on converting Buck House into the theme park palace we know today. Queen Victoria did not use it much. This embarrassed the great and good of the day, who, it turns out, were much like the great and good of our own day: i.e., full of socially responsible ideas. In 1890, for example, someone suggested that the palace be turned into a home for fallen women. (Piquant, what?)

Suggestions that the palace be opened to the public were however rejected with the contempt they deserved until this year when, faced with a bill of £40 million for the fire damage at Windsor Castle, the Queen agreed to take in paying guests, but for a limited period—five years—and for only two months each year. Her Majesty’s subjects were not greatly impressed. Only the eighteen state rooms are open to the rude gaze. “Eight pounds for 18 rooms out of 661,” sneered the *Guardian*. “Big deal.”

But for the tens of thousands of Americans who this summer stood in line for up to three hours to get into the palace—

the tour lasts for about three-quarters of an hour—it was a big deal. “I’m honored to be here,” said the Virginian. “Honored. Have any Americans told you what an honor it is to be here?” A dietitian, in her sixties, from Atlanta, Georgia, said: “It’s just like a palace should be, and such good value.”

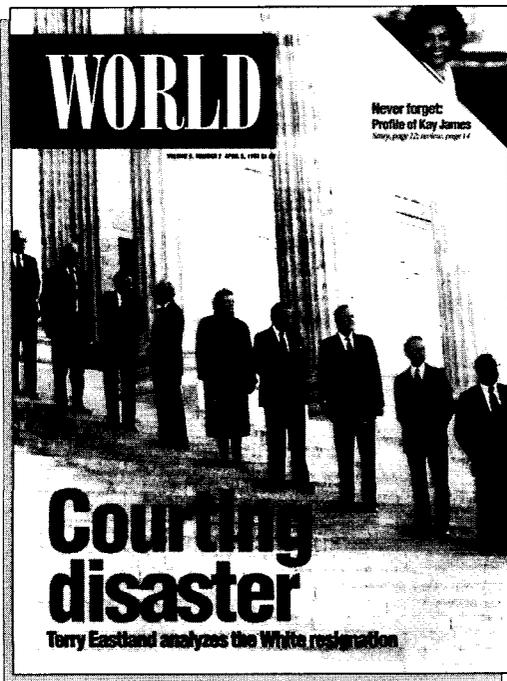
The dietitian was right, at any rate, about the value. As well as the wealth of kitsch, there is the Picture Gallery, where visitors can swoon over paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Hals, Cuyp, Van Dyck, and de Hooch. “Outstanding works are marked with an asterisk,” says the official guide. “Must be in case we are too dumb to figure that out for ourselves,” said a man in his fifties from Kiawah Island, South Carolina.

In addition to the paintings in the gallery proper, there are the royal portraits scattered about the State Rooms, perhaps most arresting of which is the magnificent, slightly bug-eyed George III by Allan Ramsay (1713-84). “What about that George III, then?” I asked the dietitian, quoting the Declaration of Independence to the effect that the king’s crimes were “scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous Ages and totally unworthy of the Head of the civilized Nation.” “I don’t care about George III,” she replied. “Now that General Sherman, he’s another matter . . .”

The idea that Britain might one day become a republic struck the dietitian as absurd. “Royalty might be a bit anachronistic, but where would you be without them? Imagine America without the movie stars.” The Virginian agreed: “Nobody but a crazy person would say that royalty is finished. Listen, this is no window-dressing Queen. She is in control of herself and her environment. She is brilliant, she is witty, she is clever.” Such devotion.

Earlier, outside the palace, two yahoos had been lounging about in T-shirts printed with the words: “I was in ER bedroom.” Poor Elizabeth Regina. Sometimes it seems that her only loyal subjects are to be found in the former colonies. □

Stuart Reid is assistant features editor of the London Sunday Telegraph.



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