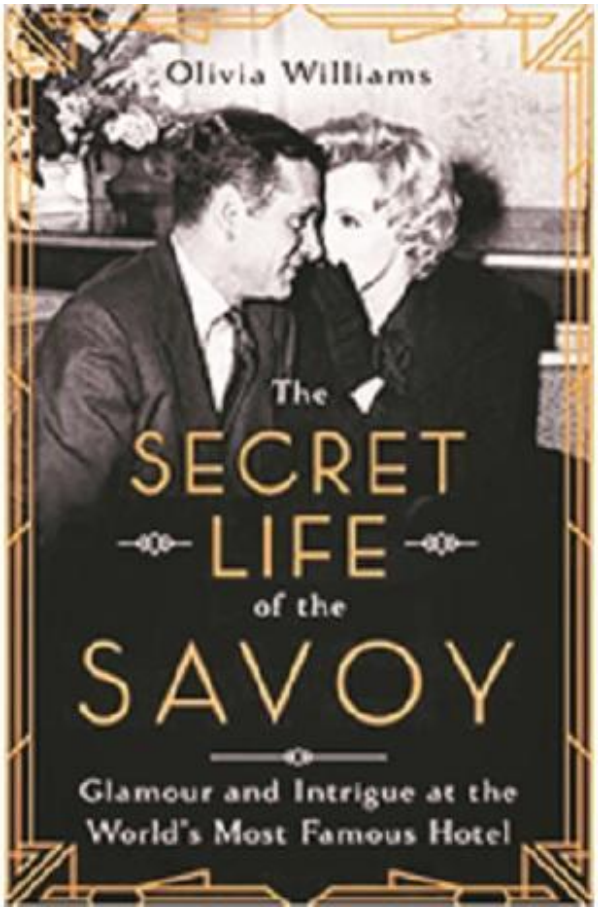
The singular pursuit of pleasure



If there were a moment that epitomised the English beau monde's self-styled insouciance in the face of the London Blitz, it took place in April 1941, at the Savoy Hotel.

One evening, writes Olivia Williams in her thorough and entertaining The Secret Life of the Savoy, a bomb exploded right outside the hotel, and "threw bandleader Carroll Gibbons off the stage at dinner."

The meal continued as if nothing had happened, according to Noël Coward, who happened to be living at the hotel at the time. He rose from his seat and approached the piano, keen to help the show go on. “Wall bulged a bit and door blew in,” he wrote in his diary. “Orchestra went on playing, no one stopped eating or talking. Blitz continued. Carroll Gibbons played the piano. I sang, so did Judy Campbell and a couple of drunken Scots Canadians. On the whole a strange and very amusing evening.”

The Savoy was built for such moments, devoted to the notion that no outside event should deter the glitterati from the pursuit of pleasure within its walls. Called “The Hotel de Luxe of the World,” in the grandiose verbiage of its founder and proprietor, Richard D’Oyly Carte, it opened on London’s Strand in 1889 — apparently not a moment too soon.

England’s hospitality industry was at a low ebb, Ms Williams writes, with few decent hotels or restaurants. For a thriving metropolitan capital, London was particularly un-fun, with a dreariness that caused the rich and the glamorous to flee to the Continent, clutching their steamer trunks. “The cooking was execrable,” the celebrated Australian opera singer Nellie Melba said of the city’s hotels before the Savoy’s arrival.

Melba is one of countless boldface names who flit in and out of the book (and the hotel). In honour of her many visits, the Savoy kitchen invented two dishes for her, each for a different dietary mood: Peach Melba (ebullient) and Melba toast (abstemious). As the book goes on, we meet kings and spies, actors and artists, presidents and poets, as well as a vivid cast of idiosyncratic hotel managers, chefs and bartenders.

But before we get there, Ms Williams takes us back to 1844, when D’Oyly Carte was born to upwardly mobile parents in London’s Soho. He amassed a great fortune doing the things he loved. He was a wildly successful theatre impresario and agent whose greatest contribution to English culture lay not in hotels, but on the stage.

But the reader has come for the hotel, and what a hotel it is, built as if it were a theatrical production itself. D'Oyly Carte had an excellent notion of how the rich might like to spend their wealth. "His own love of the good life allowed him to dream up a slick operation in which everything from shoeshine to Champagne would be taken care of, on the romantic stage set of a palatial purpose-built hotel," Ms Williams writes.

The Secret Life of the Savoy: Glamour and Intrigue at the World's Most Famous Hotel

Author: Olivia Williams

Publisher: Pegasus Books

Price: $27.95; Pages: 323

D'Oyly Carte successfully convinced two European talents — César Ritz, the manager of a hotel in Monte Carlo, and the renowned French chef Auguste Escoffier — to work for him. The arrangement helped elevate the hotel to new standards of service and cuisine, although the men left in disgrace when it turned out they were siphoning money from food and drink orders. (They went on to glittering careers, though I for one will never feel quite the same way about a Ritz hotel again.)

The Savoy is where Vivien Leigh met her future husband, Laurence Olivier. It is where Oscar Wilde disastrously canoodled with young Lord Alfred Douglas. It is where the famous Parisian courtesan Marguerite Alibert — a former lover of Edward, the Prince of

Wales — quarrelled with and then murdered her husband, the Egyptian aristocrat Ali Kamel Fahmy, on their honeymoon, in 1923.

Monet and Whistler painted scenes from the windows; Guglielmo Marconi made his first wireless broadcast to the United States from one of the hotel ballrooms; the French author Émile Zola lived it up at the Savoy while, hilariously, visiting London “to observe its poor.” Winston Churchill used it as a meeting place for the Other Club, a dining society whose members drank port and spent hours “re-enacting battles with the salt and pepper shakers” in a private room.

D’Oyly Carte died in 1901. His son Rupert ran the business until his own death in 1948; it then passed to Rupert’s daughter, Bridget. Divided into three parts, one for each era of ownership, the book is rich with details, both serious and frivolous, and deftly sets the story of this singular institution in the context of the greater forces of English history.

The book ends in 1985, with Bridget’s death, and so omits my favourite modern-era Savoy anecdote. It stars the great Irish actor Richard Harris, who spent the last years of his life as a resident of the hotel.

Harris fell ill one night in 2002, and an ambulance was summoned. It would be his final night at the Savoy, but he left with a flourish. As a stretcher carried him through the crowded front hall, Harris half-lifted himself up and theatrically addressed the crowd of guests arriving for dinner. “It was the food,” he said.

Hotel