Rasputin’s assassination

Foul play

Lost Splendour and the Death of Rasputin.

By Felix Yusupov. Adelphi; 304 pages; 288

pages; £12.99

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EWmurderersboastabouttheircrimes.

But Prince FelixYusupov was no ordin-

ary killer, and his prey—the “mad monk”

Grigory Rasputin—no ordinary victim. On

the centenary of the assassination of the

Romanovs’ Svengali on December 30th,

the republication of Yusupov’s memoir

provides a timely glimpse into the

charmed, doomed world of the Russian

aristocracy, and itshecticcollapse amid the

Bolshevikrevolution.

His grasp of facts is shaky and his mo-

tives self-serving. But the princely capers

make a gripping, if sometimes repellent,

read. Yusupov’s penchants fortransvestite

dressing and wild evenings with gypsies

show an interestingly unconventional

side. His childish pranks (such as letting

rabbits and chickens loose in the Carlton

Club in London) were much funnierfor the

perpetratorthan the hard-pressed servants

who had to clearthem up.

The most important part ofthe book is

the description of Rasputin’s assassina-

tion. The humble Siberian peasant be-

witched Tsar Nicholas II and his wife, the

Tsarina, with his apparently miraculous

powers. His aristocratic assassins, recruit-

ed by Yusupov, believed Russia, misruled

to the point of collapse, could be saved

only if the royal family could be freed of

the faith-healer’smalign influence.

They cast lots, obtained some cyanide,

added it to cakes and wine, and tricked

Rasputin, whom Yusupov had befriended

earlier, into joining them for dinner. The

trusting, unarmed guest consumed the

poison, but it had no effect. Yusupov, hav-

ingfirstadvised him to pray, then shot him

in the chest at point-blankrange. Yet a few

minutes later he rose, foaming at the

mouth, “raised from the dead by the pow-

ers of evil...I realised now who Rasputin

reallywas...the reincarnation ofSatan him-

self.” After several more shots were fired,

the assassinsdumped the bodyin a river.

Much of this account, like the prince’s

motives, is questionable, The lurid tone

may have been useful: the Yusupovs lost

mostoftheirvastfortune in the revolution.

Other sources suggest that the poison was

fake; Rasputin was killed by three shots,

but the tale of his satanic resurrection is

wholly uncorroborated. Rasputin’s real

story is painstakingly told in a compendi-

ousnewbookbyDouglasSmith, an Amer-

ican scholar of Russian history. But Prince

Yusupov’saccountisgripping.