

Dancing to the Precipice - Lucie de la Tour du Pin and the French Revolution
by Caroline Moorhead.
Chatto and Windus 2009.

It takes a non pareil of a biographer to do justice to certain lives, and there can be no doubt whatever that Lucie de la Tour du Pin and Caroline Moorhead were meant to go together.

Lucie Dillon, half French, half Anglo-Irish was born in Paris into an aristocratic and well-connected family during the pre-revolutionary days of the ancient regime, and died in Pisa in 1853 at the age of 83, having outlived her husband, all but one of her children, and almost all her contemporaries.

Her incredibly long and courageous life took in the tumult of the revolution, the heady days of the Napoleonic Empire and its ultimate defeat at Waterloo, enforced exile in Britain and the United States, the vicissitudes of the French State and its political eddies and currents, and above all the death of children , relatives and friends, often in tragic circumstances.

Lucie married the man of her choice, a soldier turned diplomat called Frederic de la Tour du Pin, to whom she was devoted and, unusually for her age, with whom she was to spend fifty years of happy and close marriage. They had had six children, only the last of whom, Aymar, outlived her.

Dancing to the Precipice covers a vast canvas, and as is the way with books that deal with its period, is replete with a vast cast of characters; kings and queens, soldiers and statesmen, clerics and rogues, revolutionaries and diplomats. It is greatly to Caroline Moorhead's credit that the reader never feels swamped by details, and always able to keep a handle on the major characters in the narrative.

What makes Lucie de la Tour du Pin unique is that she kept a memoir of a significant part of her life, written in considerable detail in red leather notebooks, giving a powerful and intimately personal eyewitness account of her experiences, and it is a singular stroke of good fortune that these memoirs, together with hundreds of letters, have survived to our time where they provided much of the information that informs the biography.

Dancing to the Precipice contains many delights, for Lucie is a most attractive subject, but what I shall long remember is the chapter dealing with the family's two year sojourn in upstate New York, where she embraced the life of a farmer's wife with great relish and not inconsiderable success. This is a joy of a biography and I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh