

Readers'
Guide

The
**LAST
GRAND
DUCHESS**

A NOVEL of OLGA ROMANOV,
IMPERIAL RUSSIA, and REVOLUTION

BRYN TURNBULL

Bestselling Author of *THE WOMAN BEFORE WALLIS*

“A GORGEOUSLY TOLD TALE.”
—NATASHA LESTER, author of *The Paris Secret*

Behind the Book



In May 2016, I boarded a plane in Edinburgh with all my worldly possessions and flew to Berlin. I had just completed my master's degree: with no set plans (beyond finishing *The Woman Before Wallis*), I'd packed up my tiny flat and was ready to return to life in Canada. But first, I'd resolved to visit an old friend.

Air travel being what it is, I arrived in Berlin with none of those worldly possessions: the airline had lost my luggage. All I had was my backpack which contained my computer, a weather-beaten copy of *Rosemary's Baby*, and a pair of pyjama pants that had belonged to my ex-boyfriend. My friend, Pierce, had planned a nice dinner out to mark my arrival in Berlin, but given my lack of proper attire we decided to stay in. Pierce popped out to pick up a bottle of wine and a pizza, while I hand-washed my underwear to the tinny sound of Brandenburg Airport's on-hold music.

"So," Pierce said as he topped up my glass. "What will you do next?"

"Publish *Wallis*," I replied, "if I'm lucky."

He smiled. "But what about after *Wallis*?"

(Pierce was, and is, an incredibly encouraging person.)

"Well..." I hesitated. "I've got an idea for another book, but it's kind of been done. What do you know about the Romanovs?"

Though Olga Nikolaevna spoke to me as a character, I wasn't sure about writing her story. After all, the last Romanovs are the most well-documented family in history. Who needs another book about them?

Behind the Book



“Even if you decide not to write it, I’m still curious,” Pierce said after I’d raised my objections. “And it’s not like we’re going out tonight. So why not tell me?”

Three hours and a second bottle of wine later, I’d given Pierce the saga of the last Romanovs: WWI and Rasputin; Alexei’s hemophilia. Four daughters, locked away from the world; the family’s last days in Ipatiev House.

The last Romanovs are well-known, but too often the daughters are overlooked in favour of the admittedly juicier details of Nicholas and Alexandra’s relationship with Grigori Rasputin. But looking at the story through the lens of Thelma Furness – a woman who’d been effectively written out of history – the reduction of the Romanov daughters to a single monolithic entity (known as OTMA) felt wrong. To me, Nicholas and Alexandra’s daughters deserve to be known on their own merits, and Olga – politically aware, devoted to her family yet yearning for more than they could give her – seemed the right place to start.

By the time we finished that second bottle of wine, Pierce was hooked. “And Mitya? What happened to him? How about Rasputin, how did he die?”

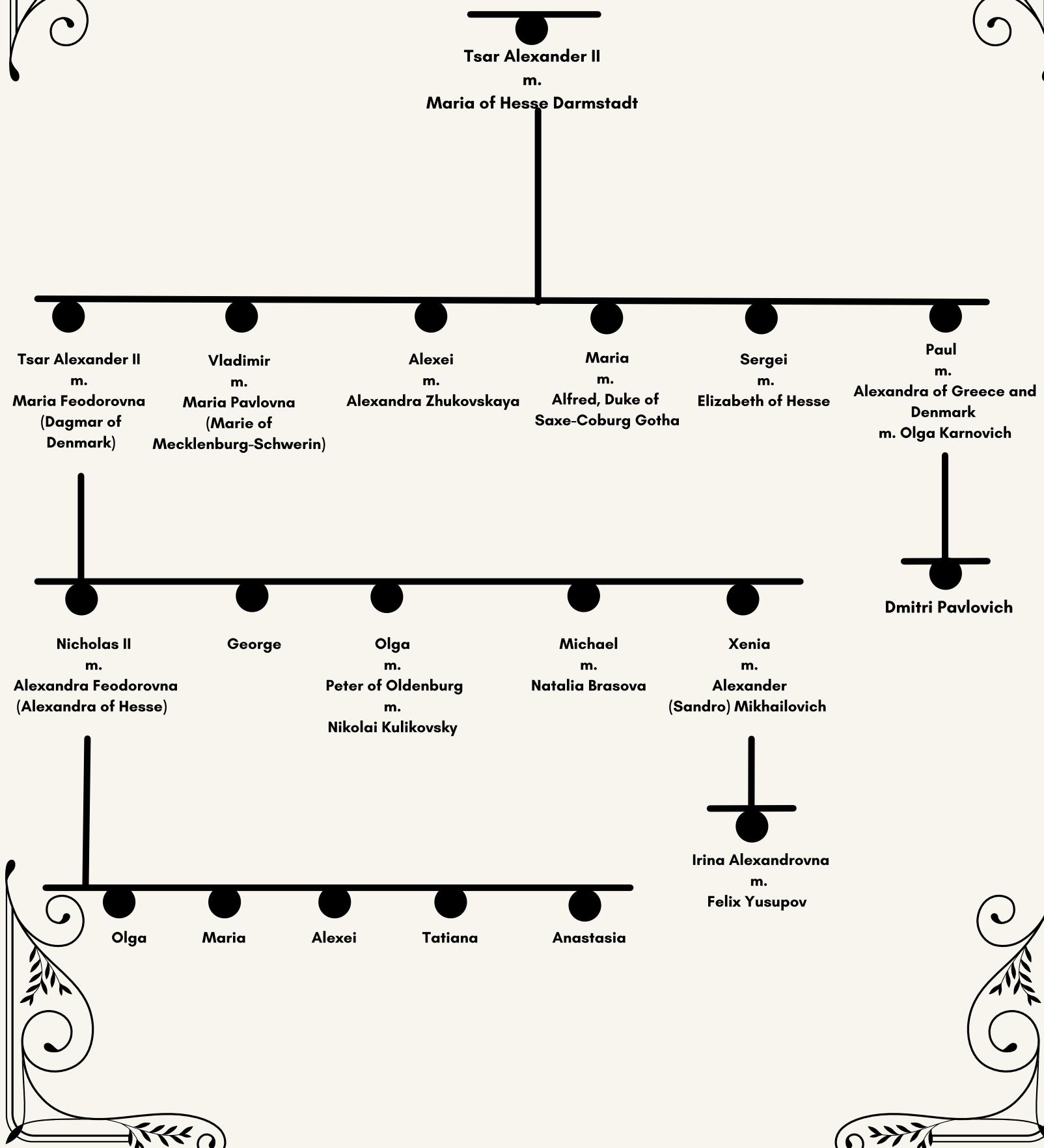
I’d started out thinking that the story of the Romanovs was too well-known to merit another retelling. But looking deeper into the circumstances of Olga’s life – and looking at the expression on my friend’s face – I realized that perhaps there was room on the bookshelf for another story.

—Bryn



Russian Royal Dynasty

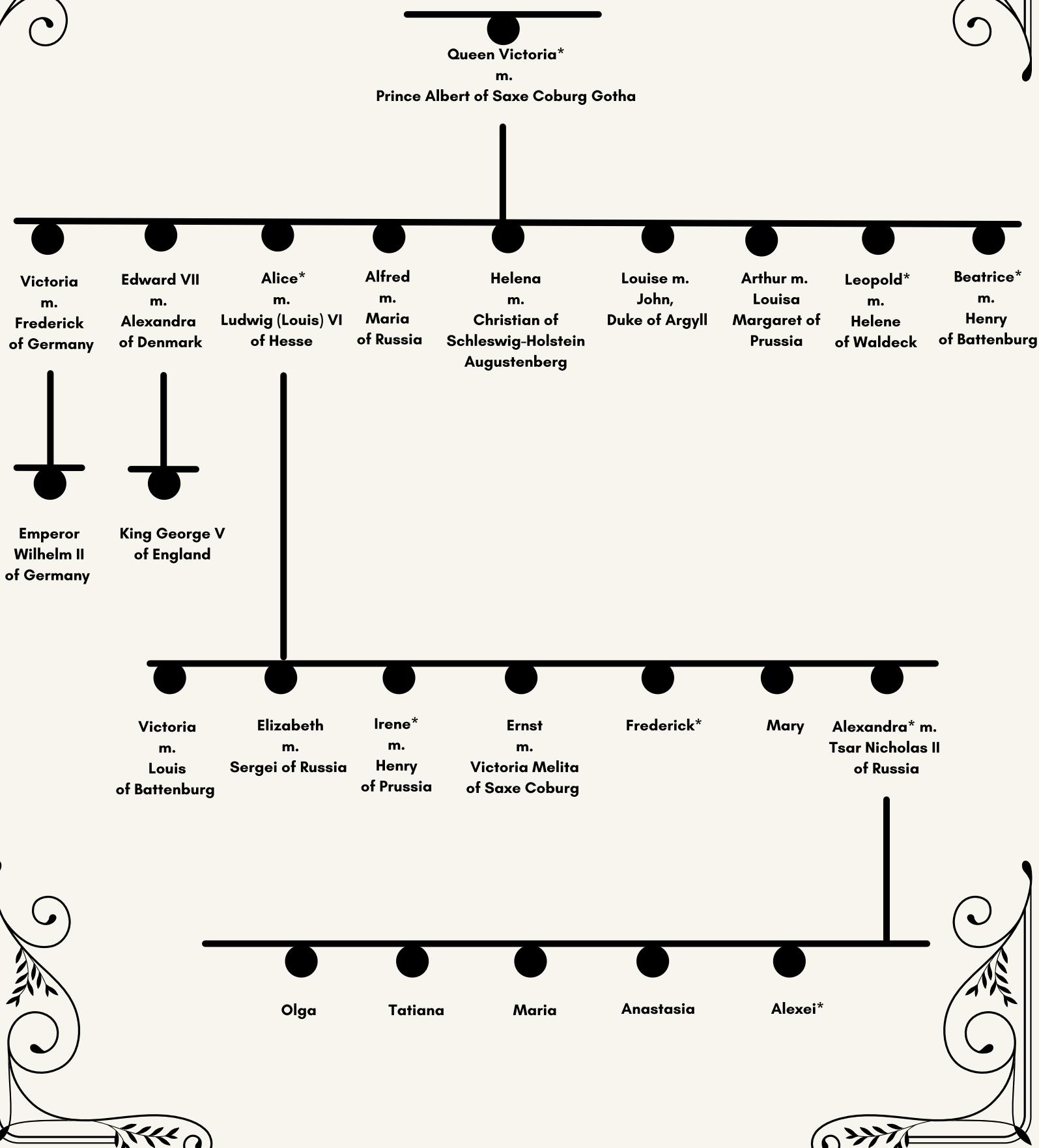
This is a simplified family tree for the Russian royal family, excluding characters who don't appear in *The Last Grand Duchess*





British Royal Dynasty

This is a simplified family tree for the British royal family, with asterisks to show carriers of hemophilia from Queen Victoria's line



Author Q&A

Why write about Olga, rather than her better-known sister Anastasia?

As a frequently impersonated historical figure (the subject of an animated Fox movie) Anastasia holds a lot of interest to modern audiences—but as the protagonist of a book which focuses on the political dynamics surrounding the fall of the Romanovs, she's less compelling. Anastasia was a sixteen-year-old girl when she died, and an incredibly immature sixteen-year-old at that. Unlike her eldest sister Olga, who wrote frequently in her diaries about the political climate in Russia, Anastasia had teenage preoccupations: crushes, gossip, and lessons. By contrast, Olga was ideally situated not only as an intellectually engaged spectator to the last days of the Empire, but also as an active participant: of her siblings, she had the closest relationship with her father, giving her in-the-room access to the abdication and its aftermath, and her war-work as a Red Cross nurse gave her a unique perspective on how the war impacted not only the nobility, but the Russian population at large.

And of course, as a more mature young woman, Olga's personal life provided a real fascination as well. A grand duchess who falls in love with an officer? What author could resist?

Why was Alexandra so enthralled with Rasputin?

Given her popular reputation as a morose and withdrawn woman, it is perhaps surprising to learn that Alexandra's childhood nickname was "Sunny" – but by the time we meet Alexandra- also known as Alix - in *The Last Grand Duchess*, the weight of the world has fallen on her shoulders. Though her marriage to Nicholas II was absolutely a love match, by 1903 she'd failed in her one task as empress: to produce a son and heir for the Russian throne. She'd given birth to four daughters, of course, but Russian law barred them from the line of succession.

Alix was an insecure woman at the best of times, and the fact that high society had begun to mutter about whether Nicholas had chosen the wrong wife surely weighed on her mind. She loathed public events, never made much of an effort to ingratiate herself with the St. Petersburg elite (preferring to see herself, in a romantic and patronizing way, as the mother of the low-born Russian peasantry), and was awkward in a crowd: moreover, she'd never managed to get much of a handle on the Russian language, which further alienated her from the high society women who would otherwise have been her friends and confidantes.

Given the pressures of her public role and her private insecurities, it's not surprising that a man like Rasputin – who was pious, low-born, willing to say what Alix wanted to hear, and able to help her vulnerable son – was able to become such an invaluable support.

Author Q&A

Did the scene with the seer actually happen?

Yes. Alexandra's visit to the seer at Nizhny Novgorod is well documented, and absolutely eerie – in her diaries, Olga writes of the patchwork curtain that covered the seer's cot, and describes the seer as wearing iron fetters, claiming that she looks "107 years old."

The seer's warning to Alexandra – "Behold the martyred Empress" – comes to us from a couple of different sources. Olga herself notes in her diary that the seer told Alexandra that it would "all be over soon" and that "everything would be all right"; Anna Vyrubova and Ida Buxhoeveden, who both accompanied the Imperial family on the trip, recount the moment more dramatically: both of them state that the seer cried out "Behold the martyred Empress," though Buxhoeveden claims that Alexandra didn't hear the warning. In my retelling of the scene, I wanted to strike a chord between Olga's recollection and the retainers' more melodramatic descriptions – especially given the fact that both Vyrubova and Buxhoeveden wrote about the visit after the fact, and most certainly with an eye to posterity.

You wrote *The Last Grand Duchess* in 2019/2020. How did the pandemic affect your research process?

I began working on *The Last Grand Duchess* at the end of 2019, and as with *The Woman Before Wallis*, I'd planned on visiting the locations where the book takes place. To that end, I was in the process of arranging a research trip to St. Petersburg when the first lockdown threw my plans into disarray.

As much as I would have liked the opportunity to visit Russia, research can always be done from the comfort of home – thank you, internet! Given the amount of documentation on the Romanovs – memoirs, documentaries, newsreels, diaries, historical accounts, and more – there was more than enough to go by to come to an understanding of the characters. In terms of location-scouting, I was lucky enough to have YouTube – so many people have posted their videos of Alexander Palace and the Winter Palace online, so there was plenty for me to work with in the absence of physically going there myself.

Strangely enough, the pandemic also led to new insights about my characters. In Ontario, we went through an extended at-home lockdown, and while the lockdown in no way resembled the house arrest that the Romanovs endured for the last months of their lives, it did give me an appreciation for the monotony and uncertainty of what their days must have been like.

Author Q&A

Do you think Nicholas II understood how he'd failed Russia as an emperor?

Historically, Nicholas II was an ineffectual ruler, one who believed that his birthright gave him carte blanche to do and say what he liked. According to him, as emperor he was God's chosen representative on earth – therefore, he believed that any conclusion he made on Russian government policy was, by definition, God-given.

Of course, this meant that Nicholas was incredibly susceptible to manipulation by his advisors. It was said that the last person who spoke to Nicholas on a given topic tended to get their way; paradoxically, he was also known for being incredibly polite and accommodating to his advisors, then turning around and doing whatever he'd planned to do in the first place. He also insisted on having final say on pretty much everything that went on in Russia, whether or not he had any real understanding of the issue at hand, which meant that government moved agonizingly slowly: how could it not, when Nicholas was bogged down in the minutiae of so many different portfolios? As a result, it was very difficult to get anything done in the court of Nicholas II, which absolutely contributed to the destabilization of the country in the early days of the First World War.

The real tragedy about Nicholas was that, as ill-equipped as he was to be Emperor, he never truly wanted to the job in the first place: he would have been content as a gentleman farmer, or as a minor Russian nobleman. To Nicholas, the only thing that mattered, both before the Revolution and after, was his family. Had he been able to live a quiet life as a family man, he would have been quite content.

What did you enjoy most about writing this book?

As a student of history, I'd been familiar with the story of the Romanovs for a long time, but the thing I enjoyed most about writing this book was coming to a deeper understanding of who the family was, not as symbols but as individuals. Olga's passion, Anastasia's impishness, Maria's good nature and Tatiana's practicality... so often, the Romanovs are seen as tragic figures, and of course they were, but they were also living, breathing people: a devoted, loving, family that shared jokes, played games, had disagreements, and enjoyed each others' company. The circumstances of their deaths notwithstanding, this was a deeply committed family with their virtues and flaws, just like any other. I hope that I managed to reflect who they were as people.

Questions for Discussion



1. Why do the Last Romanovs hold such a fascination for modern audiences?
2. Despite sharing a sheltered upbringing, Olga believes her sister Tatiana to be more “worldly” than her. Why do you think she feels her younger sister is more equipped to handle the nuances of high society?
3. Dmitri Pavlovich describes himself as a “lonely fool,” who hopes that someone might “take him seriously one day.” How does Dmitri change over the course of the book, and how do those changes result in his participation in Father Grigori’s assassination?
4. In the prologue, Grandmamma Maria Feodorovna tells Olga that courage means “meeting whatever the future may hold with grace.” How does Olga exercise courage (or a lack thereof) throughout the book?
5. How do Olga’s experiences during World War I open her eyes to the inequities in Imperial Russia?
6. Nicholas and Alexandra view themselves as parents, first and foremost. How do they attempt to reconcile the duties of ruling with caring for their children?

Praise for THE LAST GRAND DUCHESS:



"From Saint Petersburg to Siberia, sweeping back and forth in time, Bryn expertly weaves together an all-consuming story of The Russian Revolution and the fall of the House of Romanovs. *The Last Grand Duchess* features a true heroine who displays courage and grace in the face of war, making sacrifices of the heart in the name of family and country loyalty. Historical fiction fans will devour this one!"

—Renée Rosen, **USA TODAY** bestselling author of *Park Avenue Summer*

"Olga proves time and again that she was a woman ahead of her time, a woman who, heartbreakingly, could have given so much to Russia, her family and the man she loved if only she was given the chance. A gorgeously told tale."

—Natasha Lester, **New York Times** bestselling author of *The Paris Secret*

"From glittering palaces to field hospitals, privilege to prison life, Bryn Turnbull portrays the downfall of a royal family with clarity, empathy, and intimacy. *The Last Grand Duchess* reads like a symphony, the last notes of the Romanovs vanishing with a staggering and tragic beauty."

—Erika Robuck, National bestselling author of *The Invisible Woman*

"Haunting and beautiful. Turnbull's take on the Olga Romanov story will leave you hopeful that love does triumph over all."

—Kaia Alderson, author of *Sisters in Arms*

"Ambitious and intimate, violent and tender, Bryn Turnbull's *The Last Grand Duchess* pulls aside some heavy curtains on Russia's history, spotlighting the tragically human characters in this royal drama. Olga Romanov is seared into my heart as the best kind of tragic heroine, one who fights and loves with every fiber of her being, even in the face of mortal danger. A deeply absorbing read."

—Kerri Maher, author of *The Paris Bookseller*

About the Author:



BRYN TURNBULL is a writer of historical fiction with a penchant for fountain pens and antique furniture. Equipped with a master of letters in creative writing from the University of St. Andrews, a master of professional communication from Ryerson University, and a bachelor's degree in English literature from McGill University, Bryn focuses on finding the stories of women found within the cracks of the historical record. She lives in Toronto.

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