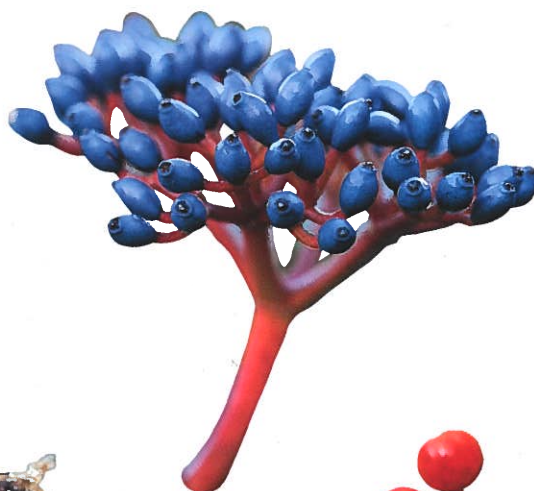
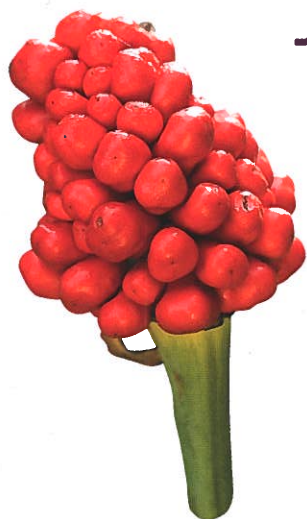


COUNTRY LIFE[®]

NOVEMBER 21, 2018

EVERY WEEK

Berry good show: Winter's garden jewels



Miracle workers: meet the restoration experts

The country house in full

A magnificently presented book offers a contemporary overview of the country house. John Goodall is impressed

**The Country House:
Past, Present, Future**

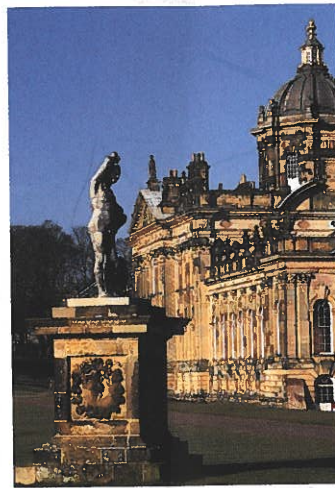
David Cannadine and Jeremy
Musson (Rizzoli, £65)

THIS sumptuous book has been published to coincide with the 45th anniversary of the establishment of the Royal Oak Foundation, an American affiliate of the National Trust. Refreshingly, for a publication with these connections, however, it doesn't simply address properties in the care of the Trust, but the whole spectrum of houses across the UK (and Ireland) in private and institutional ownership. As befits its subject, it is lavishly produced in a large format with a wealth of magnificent illustrations.

The structural backbone of the book is provided by a series of seven thematic chapters by Jeremy Musson, a former Architectural Editor and now a regular contributor to *COUNTRY LIFE*. These are variously entitled Design and Construction; Wealth and Power; Learning and Religion; Pleasure and Recreation; Household and Function; and Destruction and Survival. Each comprises a short introduction followed by a picture essay that amplifies the analysis of the text.

It's a treatment that allows for a very wide spectrum of material to be presented—from the Middle Ages to the present day—with the lightest of touches. Many of the images in these essays are beautiful photographs of relatively familiar buildings. Some of the most intriguing, however, are historic illustrations, including paintings and black-and-white photographs.

This overarching survey is introduced by David Cannadine in an essay that considers the changing perceptions and fortunes of the country house over the past 40 years. He takes as



Baroque splendour at Blenheim (left) and Castle Howard (right)

his starting point—appropriate for an American audience—'The Treasure Houses of Britain' exhibition that opened in Washington DC in November, 1985. It's a thoughtful contribution that argues for a change in the perception of the country house and its contents.

Whereas the 1985–86 exhibition presented them as supreme expressions of British cultural achievement, he argues that this perception has now given way in the face of a profound change in the popular understanding of heritage and the kinds of stories it tells (of servants and slaves, for example). Owners themselves, he suggests, moreover, increasingly perceive their houses as businesses.

Interwoven within this structure are chapters focusing on particular themes or ideas by a number of different specialist contributors. These include the process of restoring Combermere Abbey from the perspective of a private owner, Sarah Callander Beckett; on the challenges of presenting Trust houses; the changing perception of Irish houses; the history of the National Trust for Scotland; and the pioneering work of the Yorkshire Country House Partnership.

Finally, there are considerations of the connection between country houses and early-modern slavery; the challenges of researching and presenting lost country houses (through the example of Marks Hall, Essex); and the impact of *Downton Abbey* on the country house and the popular interests it has heralded and fed.

This is not a book that has any claim to completeness—indeed, the text is remarkably concise given the scale of the volume—but its broad perspective is very welcome. This is particularly true in a field that is all too often artificially fragmented in studies between houses in different types of modern ownership; between periods; between different modes of academic analysis; and between documentary, social, art and architectural historians.

For this very reason, a volume that draws so much material together and weaves it into a coherent picture is hugely valuable. However, perhaps the point made most forcibly by this book and its illustrations is just how magnificent, varied and remarkable our country houses are. These qualities can't be given too much emphasis, because we have a terrible habit of overlooking them.

Fiction

Normal People

Sally Rooney
(Faber & Faber, £14.99)

BOY MEETS GIRL is an old story—perhaps the oldest—but it's never less than fresh, fascinating and all-consuming to the parties involved. Sally Rooney's new novel offers a virtuoso rendition of this elemental human experience, exploiting its simplicity to question the rights, responsibilities and infinite complexities of love.

Beginning in 2011, *Normal People* charts four formative years in the lives of kindred spirits Marianne and Connell. They grow up on different sides of the track—his mother cleans for hers—in small-town Sligo, but, on the cusp of adulthood, discover an intellectual and emotional connection beyond the comprehension of others and, at times, themselves.

At school, Marianne is ostracised for being clever, aloof and not pretty. By contrast, Connell is handsome and popular, but burdened with sensitivity. Insecurities fade when they fall in love, but rear up with a vengeance when he denies any intimacy, betraying his own feelings and scalding Marianne's.

At university in Dublin, they resume a fitful, fretful relationship, shrewdly observed and brilliantly internalised. Marianne is now 'cool' and apparently under control; he is the outsider, raging at inauthenticity, but hobbled by doubt. They stumble towards an acceptance that each has moulded the other's nascent identity. Misstep follows misstep. It's painfully good.

On the strength of her outstanding debut, *Conversations with Friends*, Miss Rooney is promoted as 'a Salinger for the Snapchat generation'. Warmer than its predecessor, *Normal People* better resembles a dazzling—if unlikely—collaboration between Jane Austen, that refined anatomist of growing up, and Samuel Beckett, the great exponent of confusion.

Piercing the heart as it aims at the head, this is a tender comedy of manners wrapped in the belief that it is by embracing uncertainty that all lives, somehow, go on.
Caroline Jackson