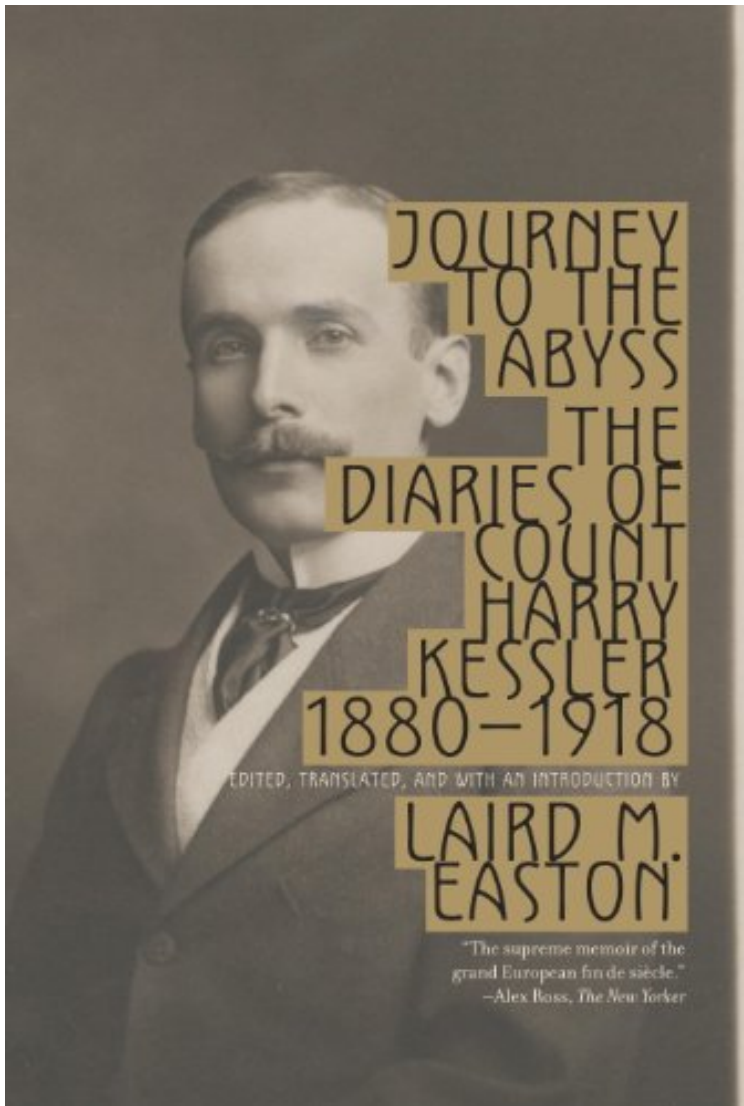


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Journey to the Abyss: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler, 1880-1918



Par Harry Kessler

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThese fascinating, never-before-published early diaries of Count Harry Kesslerpatron, museum director, publisher, cultural critic, soldier, secret agent, and diplomatpresent a sweeping panorama of the arts and politics of Belle poque Europe, a glittering world poised to be changed irrevocably by the Great War. Kesslers immersion in the new art and literature of Paris, London, and Berlin unfolds in the first part of the diaries. This refined world gives way to vivid descriptions of the horrific fighting on the Eastern and Western fronts of World War I, the intriguing private discussions among the German political and military elite about the progress of the war, as well as Kesslers account of his role as a diplomat with a secret

mission in Switzerland. Profoundly modern and often prescient, Kessler was an erudite cultural impresario and catalyst who as a cofounder of the avant-garde journal *Pan* met and contributed articles about many of the leading artists and writers of the day. In 1903 he became director of the Grand Ducal Museum of Arts and Crafts in Weimar, determined to make it a center of aesthetic modernism together with his friend the architect Henry van de Velde, whose school of design would eventually become the Bauhaus. When a public scandal forced his resignation in 1906, Kessler turned to other projects, including collaborating with the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the German composer Richard Strauss on the opera *Der Rosenkavalier* and the ballet *The Legend of Joseph*, which was performed in 1914 by the Ballets Russes in London and Paris. In 1913 he founded the *Cranach-Press* in Weimar, one of the most important private presses of the twentieth century. The diaries present brilliant, sharply etched, and often richly comical descriptions of his encounters, conversations, and creative collaborations with some of the most celebrated people of his time: Otto von Bismarck, Paul von Hindenburg, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Diaghilev, Vaslav Nijinsky, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Sarah Bernhardt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Marie Rilke, Paul Verlaine, Gordon Craig, George Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville-Barker, Max Klinger, Arnold Bcklin, Max Beckmann, Aristide Maillol, Auguste Rodin, Edgar Degas, duard Vuillard, Claude Monet, Edvard Munch, Ida Rubinstein, Gabriele DAnnunzio, Pierre Bonnard, and Walther Rathenau, among others. Remarkably insightful, poignant, and cinematic in their scope, Kesslers diaries are an invaluable record of one of the most volatile and seminal moments in modern Western history.

From the Hardcover edition.

Extrait 1880-1890

Ems. June 16, 1880. Wednesday. This morning we have arrived at Ems. We are staying at the villa Monrepos which is situated on the Lahn. We traveled in sleeping cars Baby, Mamma, Marie, and Sophie in one car and Papa and I in another. We arrived here at a quarter to twelve.

Ems. June 19, 1880. Saturday. The whole of Ems is in mirth today for the emperor is coming. The Bahnhofstrasse and the bridge by which he must pass are decorated with flags, flowers, and shields. The emperor is to arrive at a quarter past five and at five ready to go and meet him after a most awful bustle, for the flowers Mamma and Baby want to give him have not arrived, we are all ready to go and meet him. Presently I see the carriage with, mamma, papa, and baby come back: the emperor is only coming at half past six. At six, deputations of schoolchildren, masters, and men pass our door, the men and boys with flags and drums the girls with bouquets and corn flowers. Soon we also go-nurse, Sophie, and I in the mob and mama, papa, and Baby to the station. We place ourselves behind the schoolchildren who have lined up all down the way the emperor must pass. As the festive hour approaches the crowd gets greater. Soon a screech as if everybody was at least being murdered reaches our ears but it presently appears to be the emperor's train that has arrived. Now the emperor's carriage comes and a hail of bouquets come down on it probably meant to put out his eyes, next to the emperor sits Count Lehndorff. Behind him come all his suite in other carriages.

Ems. June 20, 1880. Sunday. This morning the emperor comes on the promenade and speaks to Mamma.

Ascot, St. George's School. September 23, 1880. Thursday. Thursday I came to school here today and I am all ready friends with some boys.

Ascot. December 2, 1880. Thursday. This morning I put down Uffingtona peg, at breakfast. We were talking together, when Uffington says, "Who is that blunderbuss, that fat female who came to see you." "I never knew I had any blunderbusses or fat females in my family," I answer with the greatest calm. This only shows too well how I and all my family are hated here by almost everybody.

Ascot. May 23, 1881. Monday. It is my birthday today. I was born in Paris at the corner of the rue de Luxembourg and the rue du Mont Thabor at the 3 etage in 1868 but soon after went to Hamburg. When four I went to America and stopped there till I was five then I came to England and Mamma and Papa soon after (about two years after) settled in Paris where I was during the remarkably cold winter of 1879-1880. In which the cold amounted to 24 degrees Cent. I saw the Seine frozen. Papa came to see me today and brought me a barometer and microscope.

Ascot. July 9, 1881. Saturday. Went to a review of sixty-two thousand volunteers but the most interesting of the thing was the queen's procession. In the first carriage was the queen in black the Princess of Wales in dark blue and the crown princess of Germany in white. In the same carriage but behind the queen sat John Brown the queen's favorite servant in black and silver. Then followed some huntsmen next came another carriage with the duchesses of Teck and Connaught and two other ladies then some more huntsmen and the princesses of Hesse-Darmstadt in blue then the officers of police and last but not least the king of the Sandwich Islands in another carriage. After these carriages came a royal huntsman in gold and dark crimson then came the Prince of Wales in some dark color with the badge of the Order of the Garter (blue), riding next to the crown prince of Germany in a white uniform, then came the dukes of Teck, Connaught, and Cambridge and the Duke of Hesse-Darmstadt the

husband of the late unfortunate princess Alice. A lot of others of their staff closing the procession. Ascot. October 15, 1881. Saturday. We were to go to Hampton court, where we were to lunch with Mr. Hodgekin today but as it hailed and rained we went to London instead. In the train we thought we would have our dinner so just as we had taken out our things we arrived at a station and heard the guard crying, "All change for London," so out we had to get holding our bread in our hands but we managed to finish our dinner in the other carriage. We got to Waterloo at two o'clock whence we drove to the Savoy Theatre in a bus to see *Patience* a most intensely uttered play in the aesthetic line. It is chiefly written in an incomprehensibly tattoo language. After the theater we walked down Piccadilly without a poppy or a lily as the people in the play did. We had chocolate grange not mange and got home at about seven thirty. I am growing intense. Ascot. October 16, 1881. Sunday. I am utterly consummately intense wearing sunflowers and poppies and dahlias in my buttonhole. Ascot. July 27, 1882. Thursday. I received about the worst news I could have received today.

The head has received a letter from Papa saying that I must leave this school this term and go to some Gymnasium or something like it in Baden. I wish I could stop here for at least another term, or any time, because I can by no means relish the prospect before me. I am very sorry at having to leave this place. Adolf

Kessler did not want his son to forget his German heritage, so he sent Harry to his alma mater, the Johanneum, a well-known Gymnasium, or elite German high school, in Hamburg, where he boarded at the home of a Pastor Blmer. Hamburg. January 23, 1886. Saturday. Papa came. He arrived from Leipzig this morning. He was out here at about eleven thirty with Aunt Lulu and without much beating the bush we went to the heart of the subject at once. Papa put the question of my future pretty plainly. Now I had been for days and for weeks I may say for months thinking and thinking and turning the thing this way and that without coming to a decision, and as I had from the very first foreseen, my ultimate answer was the work of a moment, what I had been brooding over for six months was decided in my mind at last in as many seconds: I

first hesitatingly and then after watching the effect pretty positively said I wanted to study.⁶ So Papa went down to Pastor B. and after almost an hour and a half conference, during which I read Mamma's new article in the *Figaro* and talked with Aunt Lulu, I was called down and told that I was anyhow to stop till Michaelmas. I am satisfied at this and we must then of course have to come to a final decision. Hamburg. January 31, 1886. Sunday. Everybody and everything full of Bismarck's great speeches on the Polish question. I can hardly sympathize with him on this point, although I would not join the opposition in Parliament. But I must say I think it rather hard for some unfortunate people because they are Poles, although they have committed no earthly wrong except having gone on speaking Polish when their masters were speaking German, eo ipso to have no right to stop in Germany. It is very like the repeat of the Edict of Nantes or the expulsion of the Salzburg Protestants and I do not think it will do much more good. Such a strong measure is I think only justified in cases where everything else has failed, in Ireland for example. There I should hardly be opposed to the measure. But really to eject thousands of industrious farmers and tradesmen when no danger is impending is to my mind very much like despotism and will probably do more harm than good. On the other hand I think it wrong to go on caviling at Bismarck for having taken this measure and I have still less sympathy with Windthorst than with Bismarck. Hamburg. February 13, 1886. Saturday. Row in London on Monday. Oxford Street, Piccadilly, Regent-Street, South-Audley-Street, etc., sacked by the mob, people in the streets robbed of their valuables, carriages broken, shops wrecked. Damage about 100,000 pounds and all this in broad daylight by about five thousand people in the face of the police, and the soldiers in the barracks. It really sounds incredible. Why on earth were not the horse guards commanded to charge and disperse the mob if need be with their swords; really when it comes to saving the richest part of London from all the horrors of a pillage nothing is too severe. However there being a nice, comfortable, sleepy, liberal, Gladstonian government nothing has been done and not even the ringleaders as much as arrested. The worst is not even the lost and destroyed property, but that now the scum of the population has seen that if it only assembles in sufficient numbers it can take whatever and as much as it likes, it will most certainly take or make the opportunity oftener of helping itself. The consequences of the inaction in London are already being felt in the form of rows in Leicester and Birmingham where the strikers have simply demolished the factories. God knows what will happen next. The French Revolution merely began by a mob and a pillage. This week I have read Jefferson's *Byron*, "*Childe Harold*," Macaulay's *Byron* and some more of his essays, a little of *Pickwick*, a little of *Voltaire*, besides working a good deal in Greek and Latin. Hamburg. March 30, 1886. Tuesday. News better. Although the strike has spread and is still spreading in Belgium, the worst seems to be past and the troops are apparently slowly but surely getting the better of the rebels. But the signs of the times are bad. Before the first French Revolution the marquesses and

abbs talked incessantly about bettering the situation of the tiers tat, and now the tiers tat talks a good deal about bettering the situation of the working men. If the better classes do not look sharp and really do something we will wake up one morning and find ourselves in the midst of the wreck of social order as the marquesses one fine day woke up and found themselves in the midst of the wreck of the old aristocracy. It seems to me we are now since 1789 going through the same sort of process of regeneration the Roman world went through between 300 and 500. It is only to be hoped all civilization will not again be destroyed by the anarchists. Hamburg. August 30, 1886. Monday. Prince Alexander has returned to Bulgaria.⁸ Bismarck has crowned his meanness in this question by publishing a spiteful article in the Norddeutsche Allgemeine. On the whole B. has sunk 60 percent in my esteem by this question. He might have left A. to his fate with a few words of sympathy, instead of which he has had the most biting and insulting articles published against him. It is very cheap fun to exult over people who are too weak to hurt you. Added to his dirty behavior toward us personally, this completes his picture in my mind. His behavior toward us I had always forgiven, and always defended him against Mamma, but his behavior in this Bulgarian question is impardonable. He is a great man with a great deal of littleness and petty spitefulness at the bottom of his character. Hamburg. January 23, 1887. Sunday. Went out visiting in the afternoon. The general impression here is that war will break out before very long. German government is going to forbid horses being taken out of Germany; the French are building large wooden barracks on the German frontier, and the amount of wood they use is so great that the wood trade in Alsatia [Alsace?] that was very depressed but a week or two ago is now flourishing. Boulanger⁹ is going to mobilize, "just as an experiment," he says; besides this repeater rifles and melinite are being worked at night and day in the French factories. If war breaks out, I am afraid it will not be only between France and Germany. Hamburg. March 22, 1887. Tuesday. Emperor's birthday; ninety. Where shall I be in seventy-two years? Hamburg. May 23, 1887. Monday. My birthday; nineteen. First thing that arrived this morning was a box from Paris containing a picture from Mamma, gloves, cravats, pamphlets, etc., from Papa, and a little shoe and sachet from dear little Gee. Received bad news from Mamma; Papa will probably lose his trial and consequently half his fortune: Mamma writes I am to pursue my present career; but of course I should not think of doing so ungenerous a thing; but try and help poor Papa in his misfortunes. Hamburg. May 29, 1887. Whitsunday. Stopped at home reading. Have lately read Pope, Sheridan, Gray, a little of Macaulay, and finished Caesar all but the Bellum Hispaniense. He was certainly one of the greatest men and one of the least bloody conquerors that ever lived. His account too of the Gauls is of the highest interest; the French character has not changed a bit in two thousand years; it is an eminently feminine character: vain and vindictive, proud yet easily dispirited, impetuous yet fickle, half fire and half sleet they have ended by falling in love desperately with a man: Boulanger; and just so Caesar represents them to have been in his time. Hamburg. June 2, 1887. Thursday. Read Pepys in the afternoon, and one of the most delightful books I know. Hamburg. June 5, 1887. Sunday. As to Pepys, I think him even superior to Boswell as far as delineation of character goes; not a foible, not a thought, not a pleat in his heart is hidden; poor Pepys! He would rather have hanged himself than have allowed his diary to be seen by anybody; he seems to have been a very vain and rather heartless man and a little too fond of money; his taste too is not irreproachable: he always treats Shakespeare's plays with the most provoking contempt. But he was a good fellow at heart, and even capable of sacrificing his own to his friends' interests. This his behavior to Lord Sandwich plainly shows. His conduct too in the navy office was highly honorable. On the whole I can not help having a fondness for him, notwithstanding all his faults and failings. Hamburg. July 6, 1887. Wednesday. Walked home in a regular hurricane, my hat flying away three times on my way home. My Evelyn came this morning, so spent the time till dinner cutting the leaves and looking into him here and there. I am very fond of these old diaries. Knowing old memories is like having a friend in a distant country. Hamburg. August 20, 1887. Saturday. One thing I miss in Evelyn that pleased me so much in Pepys: that is the boundless openheartedness with which the latter relates even the smallest and sometimes the not very creditable occurrences of his life; but then Evelyn wrote for other eyes but his own, while Pepys probably never imagined that anybody but himself would ever see his diary. *Revue de presse* Meticulously translated and edited by Laird M. Easton. . . a 900-page marvel. . . An important, underappreciated, unforgettable book. Robert Harris, *The Guardian*, *Writers and Critics on the Best Books of 2013* A document of novelistic breadth and depth, showing the spiritual development of a lavishly cultured man who grapples with the violent energies of the twentieth century . . . also a staggering feat of reportage. The war fever infected Kessler . . . [he] does not hide the grimness of the scene. For the reader, it is a shock to be deposited in such hellish landscapes several pages after watching the antics of Diaghilev and company; few books

capture so acutely the world-historical whiplash of the summer of 1914. . . . The supreme memoir of the grand European fin de siècle. Alex Ross, *The New Yorker* Kesslers diaries are a trove of insightful . . . information about an absolutely amazing number of artists and writers. John Rockwell, *The Threepenny* What makes [Kessler] such an appealing figure is his struggle with the received ideas of his age. . . . His diaries fascinate on various levels, first of all as an observant, witty, frequently catty chronicle of European culture and high society between the fin-de-siecle, and following that [though not this volume] between 1918 and the Nazi regime. Ian Buruma, *The New York of Books* An unusual guided tour of belle poque and early-20th-century artistic and high life in Berlin, Paris and London . . . with great sensitivity and occasional flashes of humor. Louis Begley, *The New York Times* The well-connected diplomats gimlet-eyed view of a teetering Belle Epoque Europe. Megan OGrady, *Vogue* A Henry James figure come to real life: a fusion of high society and high intellect, his diaries dramatize with the most stellar possible international cast the twilight settling on a peak. Frederic Morton, author of *A Nervous Splendor: Vienna 1888-1889* Harry Kessler was an extraordinary exemplar of the crisis that overwhelmed Europe in the 20th century. He captured, in his person and in his thoroughly engrossing diaries, all the dichotomies of his era: the ideals and the devastation, the passion and the despondency, the frisson and the horror. . . . Absolutely riveting. In its literary brilliance and evocative power, the diary is the equal of those of Virginia Woolf, Harold Nicolson and Andr Gide. Mr. Easton ranks it one of the greatest diaries ever. Many will agree. Modris Eksteins, *The Wall Street Journal* At last a diary as penetrating on Berlin as the Goncourt brothers on Paris has been translated into English. . . . Laird Easton is to be congratulated on leading English-speaking readers, via Kessler's masterpiece, into the heart of Germany before its catastrophe. *The Spectator* Count Harry Kessler became, through his experiences and through the anguished searching of his spirit, something close to a representative man. He seeks out great artists and gives us memorable portraits of Verlaine in old age, of Degas and Renoir, of Rodin and Maillol, of Rilke and Hofmannsthal, of Cosima Wagner, of Richard Strauss, of Diaghilev and Nijinsky, and of other great dancers and theatrical figures of the age. He tells us of the intrigues of the German Imperial Court. The cast list alone makes this an amazing diary. This is such an important book. It is a great act of historical witness, and a great source of scandalous insight and gossip. James Fenton, *The Atlantic* Kessler was a sophisticated aristocrat who knew everyone and understood everything. He rode with Nijinsky in a Paris cab the night that *The Rite of Spring* changed artistic history. He could size up a German princess with level-eyed candor. He was passionate about the arts and politics and is one of the best observers of his epoch. Edmund White, author of *A Boys Own Story* and *Genet: A Biography* Take a grand tour through the Belle poque without leaving your chair. . . . This is a classic book for the ages to keep and reread. Kirkus (starred review) I have been a huge fan of Harry Kessler since my early youth because of my mother. Even the way I dress is in a way inspired by him. The eight volumes of his diaries are always near my bedside in my houses. Kessler represents for me Germany at its best, a Germany now gone forever. Karl Lagerfeld Harry Graf Kessler was a central figure in German cultural life in the early twentieth century and during the Weimar Republic. A man of many parts, highly educated, a democrat when this was not at all fashionable he knew everyone, and everyone knew him. His massive diaries are of absorbing interest, essential reading for all those interested in European cultural history of the period. Walter Laqueur, author of *Weimar: A Cultural History* What a life! To read *Journey to the Abyss: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler, 1880-1918* is to revisit, at least in revery, a lost world of European civilization, to experience for a while all the cultivated *douceur de vivre* that disappeared forever in the blood-soaked trenches of World War I. Michael Dirda, *The Barnes Noble* An enlightening view of European high society, notable for its erudition and density of anecdote, for readers strongly interested in European history and culture. *Publishers Weekly*