

Inside the gloomy grandeur of Sursock
Palace, Lady Cochrane is a force to be
reckoned with

Lady Yvonne Cochrane Sursock

AGE: 93
ARISTOCRAT

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01
Lady Yvonne Cochrane
Sursock, 93, at home in
Sursock Palace, Beirut



Look at it now. It's an enormous slum!

الليدي إيفون كوكرين سرسق

Clad in the gloom and grandeur of Sursock Palace sits a very old woman. Wearing a checkered tweed skirt, sensible black shoes and a tasteful selection of jewels, Lady Yvonne Cochrane Sursock is as much a relic of Lebanon's past as her stately home. At the far end of the 35-metre Great Hall – an imposing entrance with tapestries lining the wall and elegant marble pillars – she is perched with L'Orient-Le Jour, a local French language newspaper, spread in front of her, and a small bowl of bread sticks within arm's reach. To preserve the tapestries, the house is dark. It's also silent, swallowing the relentless shriek of Beirut's streets in its heavy walls. Past the terrace, an empty swimming pool awaits spring.

Over a simple lunch of omelette, stuffed grape leaves and salad, Lady Cochrane slowly begins to untangle her legacy as part of one of Lebanon's noble families. 'I didn't have particular ambitions growing up,' she says. Born to an Italian mother, Donna Maria Theresa Serra di Cassano (herself a daughter to a Duke) and Alfred-Bey Sursock, a Lebanese aristocrat, her childhood was a privileged, cocooned existence. Reared on a diet of horseback riding, dancing and skiing, she was brought up by her mother and a 'very strict aunt' (her father died when she was two) until being sent to boarding school in England. When World War II broke out, she returned to the comparative safety of life in Lebanon. Apart from annual trips to Italy and her late husband's estate in Ireland, she's been there ever since.

From the family home, she was escorted straight into the marital one after her marriage in 1946 to Sir Desmond Cochrane. An Etonian and Irish Baronet who was stationed in the Middle East during World War II, he stayed on in the region as Honorary Consul-General of Ireland for the Republics of Syria and Lebanon. Although it wasn't love at first sight – 'I didn't think anything of him,

really' – their three decades together proved to be entertaining. 'My husband was very witty, you see,' she recalls, 'There was seldom a dull moment.'

Together, they had three sons and a daughter. In typical Mediterranean fashion, the family remains tightly integrated into one another's lives. One son lives on the top floor of the palace with his wife and daughter; he hosts summer functions in the palace's grounds to earn money. An Italian granddaughter has taken up residency in one of the rooms while she studies English each day. Reflecting on her experiences as a mother, Lady Cochrane is frank about her regrets. 'Instead of kissing and cuddling [my children] as you do in this country, I was very strict with them. They've always reproached me for that.' She pauses. 'But my children are the first thing in my life.' As she's aged, she's acknowledged her shortcomings and softened her approach. 'Before, I would have liked to be cuddly, but I thought I mustn't do that. It was considered to be a bad thing, bad form, bad for the children. That was a great mistake. I'm much more cuddly with my grandchildren.'

Throughout the interview, Lady Cochrane is tight-lipped when discussing herself. But beneath the veneer of upper-crust respectability, small glimpses of a more turbulent existence – despite the palaces and the privilege – emerge. There were disagreements with her mother and tears when she was shipped off to boarding school each term. Prior to her marriage, she was 'very much in love' with a man killed in an airplane crash. While charming, her husband was 'very jealous and never let [her] talk to anyone.' He eventually died after a brain hemorrhage in 1979 and she's been alone ever since. Her lineage may be as blue-blooded as they come, but Lady Cochrane has experienced the universal hardships that come with marriage, motherhood and heartbreak along with the rest of the world. ›



02
Sursock Palace is kept largely in darkness to protect its treasures





03
The palace was built in
1860 by Moise Sursock,
Lady Cochrane
Sursock's grandfather



04
The Sursocks are one of Beirut's seven original aristocratic families

05
Lady Cochrane Sursock's son, Roderick, has opened the palace's gardens for hire



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'She is a legend,' her assistant, Aline, declares with vigour. Referring to her mistress affectionately as 'Lady,' she fluidly recounts the Sursock family history and corrects Lady Cochrane when her stories become muddled. It's a loyalty that appears to be common in the household: one male member of the staff, stoop-backed and rheumy-eyed, has been with the family for sixty years. Over the decades, the household has endured its lion's share of drama, including the 15-year Lebanese Civil War, during which the house was shelled heavily numerous times. Smiling at the memory, Lady Cochrane recounts how the butler hid everything of value during the worst of that time to protect the family's heirlooms from looters. His tactics worked: the treasures were safe but, after the war ended, he couldn't immediately remember where he'd secreted them. Yet despite their shared history, the boundaries between employer and employee remain unambiguous: upon spotting the butler with his top button open, she orders him to fix it and he is quick to oblige.

Now Lady Cochrane is faced with 21st-century Beirut. She's vocal in her disdain. 'When I was a child, Beirut was one of the most beautiful cities

in the Mediterranean,' she recalls, her voice growing sharp as she reflects on the changes she's witnessed. 'Look at it now. It's an enormous slum!'

Attributing the city's decline to corruption, greed and a lack of cultured people in power, she is outraged by the high-rises that dominate the skyline at the expense of public gardens and heritage homes.

After founding the Association for the Protection of Natural Sites and Ancient Buildings (APSAD) in 1960, she has been thoroughly disheartened by Lebanon's gradual destruction over the decades and her inability to halt it. 'I was very democratically-minded when I was young,' she says. Her beliefs have changed as she's observed her country's evolution. 'Democracy does not provide rulers. The whole system is an ideal, but it does not work.'

At 93 years old, her days are as spritely and busy as ever. Named 'the generator' by friends for her impressive energy, she remains the gatekeeper of high society in a land that has undergone colossal upheaval. There are social engagements and family visits. And, from her palace window, she watches Beirut.