

Gambles with beasts

THE PASSION OF JOHN ASPINALL Brian Masters Cape, £12.95

this is the place to do so in style." It was soon handling the highest stakes in Europe.

Lord Lucan was a house player at the Clermont, but while Masters concedes that Aspinall is the "one man who might hold a key" to his disappearance, there is little new on the affair, apart from a memo-

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orable one sentence pen portrait of the Earl. "He signed his name on cheques in a perfectly straight line, preferred unadorned food like smoked salmon, and gave the impression that he hated something intensely, possibly himself."

Aspinall once wrote that "One of the most valuable functions of betting is the corrosive effect it has on such outdated concepts as the sanctity of money and the dignity of labour." His own foolhardy or courageous behaviour supports his assertion.

What distinguishes Aspinall from a thousand other hedonists in his preoccupation with wildlife, which began while living in a flat in Eaton Square. This he shared with one Capuchin monkey, a tigress and two Himalayan bears. "It is impossible with hindsight to identify the deep, firm flow of motive which

prompted the absolutely crucial decision to make these animals part of his life", says Masters, which is a pity, because the decision is the crux of Aspinall's life. What began as a mild eccentricity developed into an obsession, to which all his gambling activities were subordinated.

Soon he had piled up enough money to create his own private zoos, and had developed an extraordinary monomania. When only a few hundred people turned up to hear him lecture at the Albert Hall he concluded that mankind as a whole was indifferent to the fate of endangered species. His own achievements in the successful breeding of rare animals like snow leopards, Siberian tigers and Przewalski's horses, are nonetheless practical and important steps towards conservation.

Mr Masters takes a kindly view of John Aspinall, and dismisses those who have suggested that he cares more for the animal world than for mankind. He is intensely loyal to friends, and clearly has a remarkable empathy with some animals. But when it comes to other humans, he emerges as curiously one-dimensional, capable of both total ruthlessness and strange naivety.

Perhaps a youth spent at the gambling tables is bound to make you feel more kindly disposed towards other orders of creation. Unfortunately for several visitors and two of his keepers, not all the animals justified his sunny view of their disposition and they got either mauled or killed. On the question of whether Aspinall is a great conservationist or merely a self-indulgent right-wing eccentric, the jury is still out.

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