

Clean sweep of a rake's progress

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The young John Aspinall, then calling himself "Jonah", but soon to relinquish this invention for the tonier "Aspers", found his Damascus vision in Balliol College, Oxford, when in 1948 he gained admittance to the biggest poker school in town.

Having cunningly scraped acquaintance with its mentor, a Catholic aristocrat called Ian Maxwell-Scott, the new-minted Aspers found a game "distinguished by very high stakes and very poor players". The rest is gambling — and social — history.

By the 1960s, Aspers was boss of the Clermont Club, in a William Kent house in Berkeley Square, handling the highest stakes in Europe and possibly the world. Its 600 members included five dukes, five marquesses, nearly 20 earls, a member of the royal family (Prince William of Gloucester) and a brace each of Packers, Goldsmiths, Arab princes and US ambassadors.

Albert Broccoli, producer of the Bond films, was another fixture at Berkeley Square. Robert Harling, one of Ian Fleming's boon companions, justly said of the William Kent rooms, "If one must lose a million, this is the place to do so in style."

Below was Annabel's, the basement area Aspers planned for his own nightclub until his American backer, Eddie

THE PASSION OF
JOHN ASPINALL
by Brian Masters
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David Leitch

Gilbert, went to prison for business fraud. Under erstwhile chum, Mark Birley — they quarrelled over the use of the wine cellar — Annabel's became "without risk of exaggeration, the best-known and most chic discotheque in the world".

The twin clubs served as high temple to what Time Magazine christened Swinging London, while Fleming's Bond, transmogrified by Broccoli for worldwide film consumption, stood for the new English hero: gambler, licensed killer and womaniser. Sean Connery may have been strikingly inauthentic cast as an upper-class spy, but no more than Aspers in his role as part Regency beau, part entrepreneur.

While music, fashion and, not least, tax-breaks for US movie companies, conspired to make London briefly the world's most extravagant capital, Aspers must have thought himself in a paradise oddly like Balliol, only with the stakes multiplied many, many times, and the players even worse. Yet they felt better losing at authentic Re-



Aspinall: from gamblers to gorillas

gency tables, where Brummel and Scrope-Davis wrote a few markers in their time. Aspers disdainfully pouched 20% of "the drop", as total casino stakes are poetically called, like a chieftain accepting his just tribute.

My first foray there was for a Sunday Times Insight investigation of an ageing Wilson era industrialist, known familiarly as "Fred the Spread" for his engaging habit of betting thousand pound chips on every number at roulette. Someone pointed out to me Sir

losing streak. Fuelled by brandy from the liveried footman at his elbow, he kept losing until dawn, when they bore him off like a dying bull. It was a vignette from Genet, not Fleming: primitive cruelty in fancy dress.

Never far away was Aspers' mum, "Lady O", a steely figure whose philosophy made her a premature Thatcherite, though to read Brian Masters she sounds more like a commoner's Queen Mother. It is odd that an author whose command of detail extends to the 30

Lady O's commonest soubriquet. The son might extend mercy to big losers, especially youngsters with trustees, but Mum, the Lady Enforcer, was forever "Al Capone with a hand-bag".

Lady O, as upwardly mobile as Becky Sharp, had married a providential baronet encountered on the boat home from India. He found her sobbing on the deck, having recently divorced her doctor husband. It emerged much later that Aspers had been fathered not by the doctor but a passing Indian Army general at a Raj ball.

This is all amazing stuff, but there is too little of it. Instead we follow Aspers' progress from punters to gorillas, his politics ever farther right, his share of the drop rising to a cool £20m when Aspinall Holdings was oversubscribed 57-fold in 1978.

He was able, then, to support two zoos, employing 130 people and supporting 67 different species of animal visited by 200,000 people annually. There have been troubles and even a fatality, but the animals, like the old Clermont members, may congratulate themselves on inhabiting the world's best-fed zoo.

The dietary emphasis is another legacy from Lady O, whose food hall catering skills sustained the 1950s "floating chemmy parties" which first launched Aspers. Later she kept the Clermont menu up to scratch so that the hard-core Aspers circle, notably the luckless Lucan, would idle there for hours, feeding their angry stares with subsidised caviare, convinced that an inborn gift for shouting at servants would one day sweep them to power.

Masters adds nothing to the mystery of what happened when "Lucky" turned atmospheric murder into fact

12/8/88

DR WIT TARNAWSKI

Dr Wit Tarnawski, an expert on the life and works of Joseph Conrad, died on August 4 at the age of 94. He was president of the Joseph Conrad Society (UK) and was the author of books and articles on the writer.

Witold Tarnawski was born on July 6, 1894, at Kosów, then under Austrian rule in Eastern Galicia.

His secondary schooling and university education were in Lwów, where he obtained his medical doctorate in 1926.

His studies were interrupted by the First World War, during which he served in the Austrian army on the Italian front, and by the Polish-Soviet war of 1919-20, in which he served on the Northern front.

He took part in the battle for Warsaw, known as the Battle of the Vistula.

From 1923 until the outbreak of the Second World

War he assisted his father, Dr Apolinary Tarnawski, in running the latter's sanatorium on Kosów.

Tarnawski left Poland before the Soviet invasion of 1939 and in 1940 and 1941 was chairman of the Polish National Committees in Rumania and Cyprus as well as the "Polish Hearth" in Jerusalem.

From 1942 he served with the Polish Armed Forces of the Middle East as Chief Medical Officer of Cadet Schools, with the rank of captain.

In 1947 he brought his pupils to England, where from 1950 to 1954 he worked in the Polish hospital at Penley. From 1955 he was a consultant at the Mount Pleasant Geriatric Hospital, retiring to live in Monmouth, Gwent, in 1966. He was awarded the Officers' Cross of the Order of

"Polonia Restituta" in 1976.

His books included a novel, *Ksiadz Antoni* (Father Anthony), *A Study of Three Writers of Christian Despair* (Greene, Mauriac and Bernanos) and numerous literary articles, but the works by which he is best known are *Conrad Zywy* (1957), and a book first published in Polish in 1972, appearing in English in 1984, *Conrad: The Man, the Writer, the Pole*.

At a time when many scholars began to perceive in Conrad's works deep ambivalances, ambiguities and even despair, this Tarnawski saw in his beloved master's works the qualities which he himself so well embodied: steadfastness, fidelity and a determined belief in the potential goodness of humanity.

He married, in 1951, Maria Joanna Platowska, who survives him.