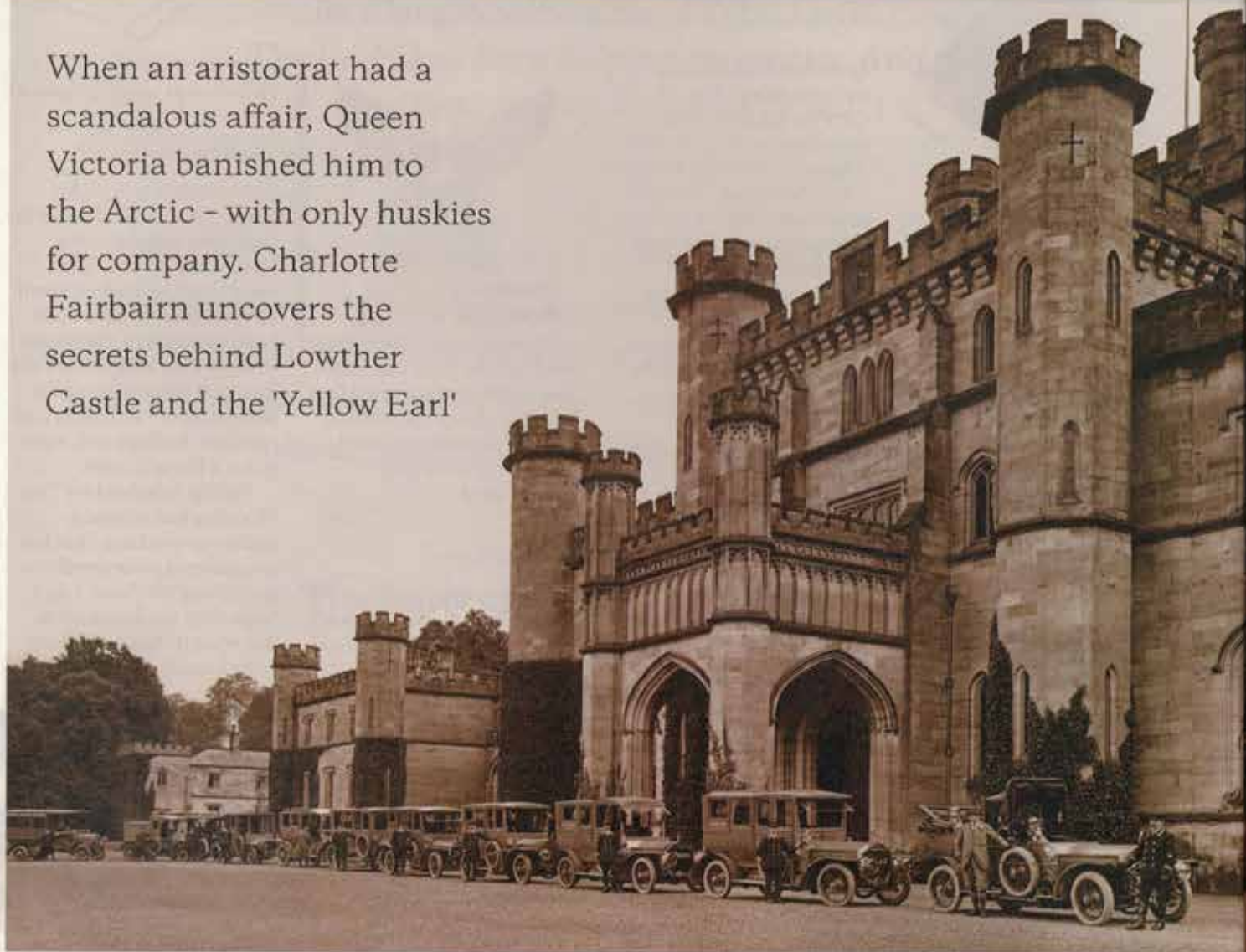


A husky, an Earl

When an aristocrat had a scandalous affair, Queen Victoria banished him to the Arctic - with only huskies for company. Charlotte Fairbairn uncovers the secrets behind Lowther Castle and the 'Yellow Earl'



On 8 February 1888, a hue and cry broke out in newspapers across our Great British land. Headlines blazed the names of an English aristocrat, a sometime Moroccan tea-taster and a glamorous actress. Sub-headings included the words 'adultery', 'deception', 'damage to property', 'birth of an illegitimate child' and 'fine' (one shilling together with costs). The upshot of the scandal was that the tea-taster was imprisoned; the actress disgraced; the Queen provoked; and the aristocrat banished on a year-long trip to the Arctic.

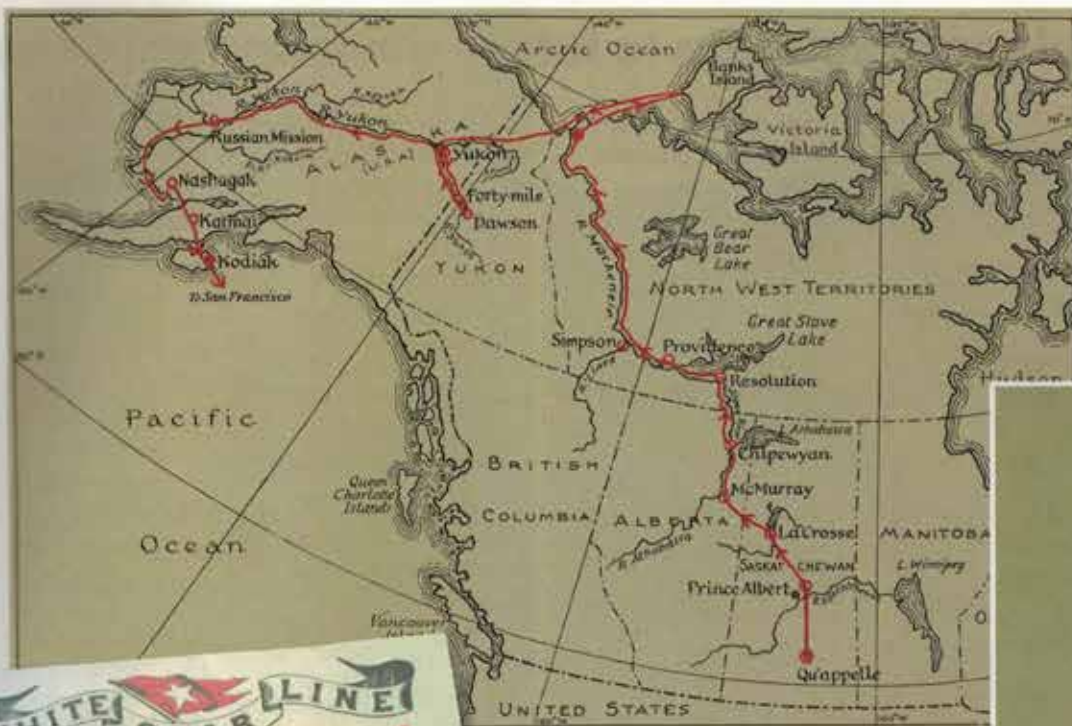
Hugh Cecil Lowther (1857-1944) inherited the title of the Earl of

Lonsdale and the estates - most notably Lowther Castle in Cumbria - unexpectedly. It was 1882. Lowther was a younger son. His brother St George was the 4th Earl and had plenty of years on his side. St George was married - to the statuesque Constance Herbert (to whom Oscar Wilde later dedicated *A Woman of No Importance*). The couple had had a daughter by the time St George was 25 and it was reasonable to assume they would go on to have an heir. But illness intervened. St George died aged 26 and his younger brother Hugh came into the title.

By the time he inherited, Hugh Lowther had already established a questionable reputation. True, at over

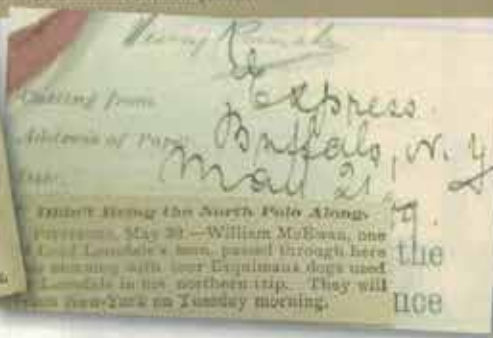
six feet three inches, he was a fine athlete. True, since an early age, he had shown a great affinity with animals and was a fearless horseman. True, he was married (to Gracie, daughter of the Marquess of Huntly). But Lowther's education had been chequered - two years at Eton were happily broken off so he could elope for a year with a travelling circus; one of his mentors was Jem Mace, a middleweight bareknuckle-boxing champion. And besides, Hugh's veins ran with the blood of a younger son - responsibility was not something that weighed heavily.

It was not surprising therefore that Hugh Lowther - wealthy, well-connected and a compulsive show- ▶



Map of the Arctic journey

Clockwise from below: Hugh Cecil Lowther, 5th Earl of Lonsdale; a news cutting from the time about the trip; the ship ticket for the Atlantic trip; map of the Arctic journey



off - came to run with a 'fast' set. He was a friend of Edward VII, Prince of Wales. Lily Langtry, the beauty, socialite and actress, was one of many women he associated with. Although married to Gracie - and it was a long and successful marriage in the end - Hugh was not deterred from actively pursuing other 'beauties', as he called them. In the mid-1880s, it was the exquisite Violet Cameron who caught his eye. Violet was an actress and singer - a moderate talent but stunningly pretty. She was married to a Moroccan tea-taster, Monsieur de Bensaude, and together they had just started an operatic company. They were to embark on a tour of the

begged for protection from her husband. Hugh decided, for appearance's sake, that they should take the company and tour across the Atlantic to New York. Here things played out just as publicly and just as messily. The American public threw its arms up in horror, de Bensaude ended up in jail and the company was forced to return. Hugh and Violet Cameron moved into a house in Hampstead and it became known that Violet was expecting a child. In February 1888 the papers reported the case of Her Majesty vs de Bensaude. The wronged man was accused of damage to Miss Cameron's property - the chief witness, the man who had

was allegedly asked to bring back samples of fauna. But it seems unlikely that the Scottish Naturalist Society even existed. Hugh himself writes of hunting game - wolverines, bison, musk oxen and even a polar bear were shot on his trip (the bear is now in the Kendal Museum).

Reports of Hugh Lowther's year-long journey from Winnipeg round the Mackenzie River and into Alaska vary hugely. He kept diaries, he wrote letters, the press followed him as best they could - but Hugh's own words were unreliable and communications poor at best. What is certain is that, back in England, the Queen breathed a sigh of relief - the sting of scandal had been drawn; likewise, Hugh Lowther's trustees were delighted - their charge was a spendthrift of Olympic proportions.

Yet banishment to the northwest territories did not mean isolation for Lowther. His diaries are peppered with references to meetings with diplomats, traders, native Americans. He was accompanied on his journey by Billy McEwan, a member of his staff who ('when not 'd...ed drunk') ▷

'At last, Queen Victoria decided to intervene - she was not amused. Lowther was advised to make a trip abroad'

English provinces, their financial backer, Hugh Lowther.

It was a dangerous cocktail. De Bensaude objected to his wife's liaison and attempted to see off Lowther. There was a fight, an assault charge and an appearance before magistrates. Amidst a flurry of writs, de Bensaude sued for divorce and Violet Cameron

dared to cuckold him, Hugh Lowther. At last, Queen Victoria intervened - she was not amused. Lowther was advised to make a trip abroad.

Why the Arctic was chosen as Lowther's place of banishment is a matter of debate. Mention is made in one biography of the Scottish Naturalist Society, for whom Lowther



Lady Lonsdale's loo.
Below: A news clipping
about her father's past

Lady Lonsdale had an interesting link with the pictorial past. She was the daughter of the ninth Marquis of Huntly, who as a young man danced a minuet with Marie Antoinette at the Tuileries and as an old man danced a quadrille with Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace. It was an incident Queen Victoria was very fond of recalling.

acted as Lowther's wingman. And on the latter part of his journey, he frequently travelled on a sled - and in the company of dogs.

Lowther took to the business of driving dogs with great gusto. He amazed local sled-drivers by teaching the dogs to obey his vocal command. Indeed, over the course of his journey, he clearly came to love the sled dogs and, on 5 November 1888, asked an Inuit tribe he was visiting if he could have some - 'I wanted to take specimens of pure Mahlemut dogs home'. The Inuits gave him two, one called Sharriks (marble) and the other Sokolka (falcon).

When Hugh first embarked on his trip, he wrote: 'Farewell my wife, my home, to all! And when I return, may the cloud that has been hanging over our own heads have burst and blue sky of a welcome greet me.' When he came back, he had the hero's welcome he had dreamed of. His collection of more than 200 tribal artefacts was presented triumphantly to the British Museum. Lowther's celebrity as a man of action was assured.

Four dogs made the journey east and then found their way back, with Billy McEwan, all the way to Lowther Castle. Their names have been lost but it is possible that Sharriks and Sokolka were among them. The



Lowther Castle now.
Left: The stuffed dog

Yellow Earl (named for his fondness for the colour) settled down to a calmer existence, still spending money like water, but no longer causing polite society to gasp. He lived between Lowther Castle and Barleythorpe, a hunting box in Rutland. He became a darling of the people, beloved of the press, his exploits in boxing, hunting and on

the national stage followed avidly. By 1936, he had spent almost all of his vast fortune. Lowther Castle was closed and he, Gracie, a reduced menagerie and staff - along with one of the dogs, which was by now stuffed - retreated to Rutland.

Now, 128 years after one of the well-loved dogs that Hugh Lowther, the 5th Earl of Lonsdale, drove across the tundra returned, it's back again - to form part of an exhibition that tells the story not just of the Yellow Earl but also of the rest of his family's remarkable 850-year history. ■

◆ *The Story of Lowther* exhibition opens to the public at Lowther Castle, Penrith, at the end of May. The castle ruins and its gardens are open all year round: 01931-712192, www.lowthercastle.org