

# A Noble Affair: The Remarkable True Story of the Runaway Wife, the Bigamous Earl, and the Farmer's Daughter

Prof Rebecca Probert



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Brought up in the stately grandeur of Burghley House as heir to the earldom of Exeter, Henry Cecil seemed to have made a suitable match to the heiress of Hanbury Hall, but their marriage ended in disaster when Emma eloped with Henry's friend, the local curate. Heartbroken, Henry turned his back on aristocratic life, taking up residence in a remote Shropshire village and marrying a farmer's daughter - without having divorced his first wife.... The story of Henry Cecil's matrimonial entanglements became part of the "sex panic" literature of the 1790s before being reinterpreted by the Victorians as a classic Cinderella tale of rags to riches, and even through into the twentieth century it was still being told and retold. "A Noble Affair" untangles fact from fiction, illustrates just how limited the options once were for those who experienced marital breakdown, and discovers that in some respects Henry did indeed behave nobly.

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