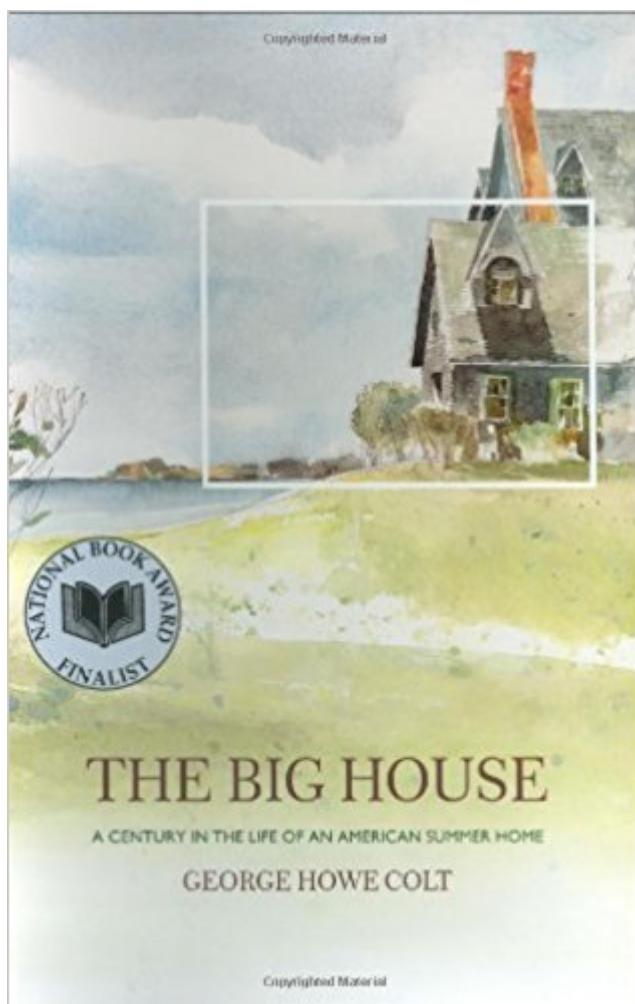


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The Big House: A Century In The Life Of An American Summer Home



Synopsis

A dual history of the Colt family and their summer house on Cape Cod recounts the house's construction one hundred years earlier, the idiosyncratic personalities that stayed there throughout five generations, the major family events that took place there, and the family's last month in the house. 25

Book Information

Hardcover: 336 pages

Publisher: Scribner (May 20, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1402566395

ISBN-13: 978-1402566394

ASIN: 0684845172

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 9.4 x 1.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 215 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #241,737 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #43 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > New England #568 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Great Britain #2842 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States

Customer Reviews

The epicenter of the Colt family is the Big House, built in 1903 on Wings Neck, a deserted strip of Cape Cod. It's not only an architectural gem but a device to chronicle family, local history and the culture of Boston Brahmins-and it accomplishes that task with charm, style and solid research. For 42 summers, Colt traveled from winter homes across the U.S. to partake in this magical place. It's where he learned to swim and play tennis, and where he kissed his first girl. Indeed, the Big House has seen five weddings, four divorces, parties, anniversaries and love affairs. The Colts, a once venerable tribe, had lost their money-"it is not wealth so much as former wealth that defines Old Money families"-but were determined to keep their ancestral home. Time may have marched on, but the Big House refused to cooperate: "Everything in this house breathes of the past." Gilbert & Sullivan sheet music, rotary telephones and ancient globes grace its interiors. Yet all is not perfect in this palace by the sea. Colt, like playwright A.J. Gurney, is adept at exposing the dark underbelly of WASP restraint, recording the mental illness, alcoholism and despair that have plagued his family. His one comfort? The Big House. This love letter to the past is a quiet delight. Copyright 2003

In 1903, the author's great-grandfather, a Boston Brahmin named Edward W. Atkinson, built his family a house on Cape Cod, at Wings Neck, the last undeveloped peninsula overlooking Buzzards Bay. The Big House, as this multi-storied conglomeration of gables, dormers, and bays came to be called, included "eleven bedrooms, seven fireplaces, and a warren of closets, cupboards, and crannies that four generations of Wings Neck children have used for games of Sardines." It was also an expensive firetrap with sixty-seven windows in need of attention, leaking roofs, wildlife procreating in its walls, and no indoor shower. In 1992, after agonized debate, the family decided to put it on the market. Colt's account, like the house that lies at its center, is full of surprises and contains more than seems humanly possible: a family memoir, a brief history of the Cape, an investigation of nostalgia, a catalogue of local fauna, a study of class, and a meditation on the privileges and burdens of the past. Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The full title of this National Book Award winner is important. It is "The Big House: A Century in the Life of an American Summer Home," and while it is most definitely about this 8,000-square foot summer mansion built in 1903 on 13 acres with 19 rooms (26 counting the bathrooms and included in that 11 bedrooms) on Wings Neck, Cape Cod, it is even more about the generations of people who summered there. Author George Howe Colt started coming to the Big House as a child in the 1950s. He writes with love about this rather run-down place that was so enchanting for a young boy, telling the history of the house and his ancestors who built it. But he gradually peels the layers of the story like an onion so before long we find out the very human story of this family, which seems perfect on the outside but is just like the rest of us close up. In 1967, something happens to the Colt family--and they are never the same. It is here we meet the real people with their heartbreaking problems: alcoholism, mental illness, marital woes and family estrangement. If you have ever had the fortune to spend time in a summer home or wondered who lived in those big houses--be it on Cape Cod or anywhere else in the United States--read this book. Highly recommended!

I read this book through a book group, and I'm glad I did. It was an interesting family history that made the term "Boston Brahmin" come to life. Each chapter focused on a different aspect of owning a second home. Mr. Colt did an amazing job of telling the story as if he weren't an integral part of it. It can be hard to separate yourself like that. Good reading as a historical novel, a family saga, and

to get a better understanding of the Boston area.

Though not Boston Brahmin, I grew up in a family that referred to themselves as "swamp Yankees". Different circumstances, same basic mindset. The main difference perhaps is that we had no money or social standing. We are just old New Englanders. Our roots go way back to the earliest settlers of the region. The story of the big house brings back so many memories of my family summers on The Cape. The extended family, the traditions, the smells and sounds. And that change of mood that hits going over the bridge, onto the cape. Although the book is about the Colts on Buzzards Bay, I can relate many of the stories to the Mains on Aunt Debbie's Lane in Dennisport. I really enjoyed reading about the history, the legacy and the traditions of the big house. They brought back so many memories of my summers growing up on The Cape. The big house is an enjoyable escape down memory lane and a must read for those who remember the days of "summering" at the beach house.

I picked out this book for my Kindle because it seemed like an appropriate choice for reading during my annual stay at the family summer cottage, where I have been going for over 50 years since early childhood. It was indeed. My own "big house" is a relatively small cottage, and it is in northern Michigan rather than Cape Cod (an area I've never visited). (On the other hand, coincidentally, the "big house" and the cottage were both first built in the same year, 1903.) Nonetheless, I almost felt as if I had lived parts of the story along with the author. The tendency to regard the summer home as more my "real" home than any of the places I've actually lived most of the year... the urge to try to hold back time by keeping the cottage and its surroundings as much unchanged as possible... the mixture of happy and sometimes sad family memories associated with the place... the issues as different family members try to share the cottage on an equitable basis, and the concerns about whether the family will remain financially able to retain the property... all these have been part of my experience as well as the author's. And as a result, the central "story line" as to whether in the present day the "big house" will have to be sold and torn down, or whether the family can somehow save it, generated more suspense for me than many a fictional story involving the fate of the world. (On the other hand, I suppose to someone who has never had the experience of sharing a summer home of this sort, the story told here might seem less meaningful and even insignificant compared to the more life-and-death type problems faced by some people. I sometimes have to remind myself, when I feel bad about not being able to spend as much time at the Michigan cottage or take part in as many activities there as I would like, that others would have grounds to envy me for being

able to go there at all.)

I grew up spending part of every summer at the Jersey Shore, socially and economically a world apart from the Colts and their Big House. Yet the author brings back many childhood memories of times that certainly were more innocent to me. He speaks of wanting to be a poet, and he certainly writes poetically about the old house and its occupants. I felt as if I knew the place so very well, yet still somewhat mystified by some of the people. This is as it should be, since most of them he knew mainly from the child's point of view. One thing he does remarkably well is describes a child's growing knowledge of what the grown ups are really like and how he felt about it. The book reads like a fine old family saga novel, one which I am very glad to have read and highly recommend to others.

I had high hopes for this book, but found it confusing at times and just not that interesting. It seemed to be a history of large summer houses, especially on Cape Cod, and a memoir of one person's experiences growing up in a large house on Cape Cod. The memories seemed to jump around and I often got the feeling the author was filling space. A family tree would have helped some.

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