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Books of The Times

By Michiko Kakutani

WHITE MISCHIEF. *The Murder of Lord Erroll. A True Story of Aristocracy, Alcohol and Adultery.* By James Fox. 299 pages. Random House. \$15.95.

THE title, of course, comes from "Black Mischief," Evelyn Waugh's satirical novel set in the mythical African kingdom of Azania, and the antics of the British aristocrats in James Fox's book are often just as bizarre. The difference is that those antics often have sad and terrible consequences, for "White Mischief" is not a novel at all, but an investigation into the 1941 murder of Josslyn Hay, the 22d Earl of Erroll. It is a piece of investigative reporting that possesses all the resonance of a social history and the drama of a good mystery.

Although unfamiliar to Americans, the story of Erroll has long captivated the English imagination, assuming over the years the proportions of a moral parable — a parable about the extravagances of the British aristocracy and the resulting decline of Empire and all it represented. A dazzling rogue and ladies' man, Erroll was, after all, one of the original founders of "Happy Valley," that notorious African playground of the rich, and the scandal surrounding his murder changed, forever, a way of life.

Since the turn of the century, Kenya had been regarded as a kind of "white man's heaven on earth." It was a place where English exiles, fleeing debt or scandal at home, could invent new lives for themselves and feel exempt from history — even at the height of World War II. They built Tudor-style mansions surrounded by grassy English parklands, and they played tennis, polo and croquet. The willful pursuit of frivolity that had characterized upper-class life in England during the 20's seemed heightened here under the hot African sun and the residents of Happy Valley warded off weariness by snorting cocaine, playing musical beds and giving decadent parties where conversa-



Jerry Bauer

James Fox

tion revolved around such topics as how to spend a million pounds a year. Almost without exception, the women were beautiful and poised; the men charming, arrogant and bored.

No one was more charming and arrogant than Erroll himself — the most attractive boy in his class at Eton and the scion of a family of "immense antiquity and grandeur." A fierce womanizer who specialized in married women, he had recently taken up with Diana, the new bride of his friend Delves Broughton. The two were seeing each other openly and one evening, Broughton — a decidedly odd and moody man — offered the couple his blessings, going so far as to offer a toast to their future together. Hours later, Erroll was found dead, shot through the head.

The case became a cause célèbre, and the subsequent trial of Broughton a major social event. But while

Broughton was acquitted by the court, the mystery of Erroll's murder remained unsolved — that is, until Mr. Fox attempted to unravel it in this book. The suspects were plentiful, and all of them had motives: Broughton, of course, had been publicly humiliated by Diana's affair with Erroll, and he had an unpleasant history that included lying, blackmail and fraud. Diana had fought with her lover earlier that evening, perhaps had even been spurned. And then there were the other women Erroll had seduced and later scorned — among them Alice de Trafford, a beautiful heiress who had already tried to kill one of her lovers — and their cuckolded husbands, too.

The story had all the delicious twists and ironies of a novel by Somerset Maugham — Maugham, Mr. Fox points out, had once contemplated writing about the case — and for years it obsessed the late Cyril Connolly, who had attended Eton with many of the principals and who found himself both attracted and repelled by the appalling excesses of their lives. In 1969, Mr. Connolly began researching the story for a Sunday Times story, and Mr. Fox, then a young reporter for the paper, played Watson to his Holmes. The two men studied court testimony, tracked down surviving witnesses and made charts, maps and timetables in an attempt to make sense of the evidence they found.

Following Mr. Connolly's death in 1974, Mr. Fox continued to seek out clues, and his efforts eventually paid off in a climactic interview with Diana herself. In writing this book, he has cleverly made his and Mr. Connolly's detective work part of the larger story of Erroll — a narrative strategy that makes for a certain amount of repetition, but that also allows the reader to have the excitement of watching a tenacious reporter piece together the truth. The result is a fascinating book.

Recital:
'Winterreise'

By BERNARD HOLLAND