

Breaking the 'Abbey' habit: Dan Stevens with his startling new look
THEO WARGO/GETTY



IT WAS VERY MONOPOLISING. IT FELT A GOOD TIME TO TAKE STOCK, DO OTHER THINGS

The erstwhile Matthew Crawley left fans bereft with his departure from the nation's favourite posh soap. Now he's in the movies – and, he tells Matt Mueller, his first appearance above the title is a labour of love

DAN AFTER DOWNTON

The pavement in front of the Athenaeum gentlemen's club in Pall Mall is scattered with dirt and gravel, a horse and carriage is parked at the entrance and sophisticated ladies and gentlemen attired in Edwardian finery mill about, occasionally posing for photos at the behest of passing tourists. "Ooh, is it *Downton Abbey* that they're filming?" one excited passer-by inquires to a trio of costumed young women, who giggle in unison and reply in the negative. But the actor who's sprung from that series's stuffy parlours to become a fully-formed member of the global fame academy is close at hand for this Sunday morning shoot of period drama *Summer in February*. Dan Stevens is in the house.

"The Edwardian milieu is my speciality right now," concedes Stevens, hidden inside the club's Greek-inspired exterior away from the eyes and ears of the fans straining to catch a glimpse. (Word has spread quickly that he's here; fan frenzy has become an everyday part of this actor's life.) "Although the plan was always to do this long before *Downton*."

Based on true events, *Summer in February* is a calamitous love-triangle set

in a bohemian artists' colony in Lamorna Cove in Cornwall, shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. Dominic Cooper stars as the colony's charismatic leader, British painter Alfred James "AJ" Munnings, while Stevens takes on his first major film role as Munnings's friend Gilbert Evans, the army officer overseeing the Cornwall estate where the artists live, and Emily Browning plays Florence Carter-Wood, the troubled young artist caught between them. It's based on the book of the same name written by Jonathan Smith, a retired English teacher who taught Stevens at Tonbridge School in Kent and recalls his precocious pupil marching up to him at the tender age of 13, demanding to go up against 18-year-olds for the role of Macbeth in an impending school production.

"That's absolutely true," insists Smith, sitting in a red leather chair in the Athenaeum's imposing library. "When Dan auditioned, it was one of those tingly moments. *Downton*'s made him famous but put that on one side: he's a seriously gifted actor. For me, it's just sheer good luck that he happened to be at the school I was teaching at."

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When I later stroll into the Athenaeum's sun-dappled gardens to find Stevens, he's practising fly-fishing moves for a scene to be shot the next day. He laughs when I recount his early mentor's recollections: "He remembers it very differently from me. I'm sure I offered to play a lesser role." Stevens is dismissive of the notion that he was ever that bolshie, but praises Smith for moral support and pep talks during his adolescent years as a boarder at Tonbridge. "He persuaded me to go to Cambridge and read English. Even though he knew I wanted to be an actor, he knew that was a good call. And it was. All the way along, he's just quietly given me very wise advice."

Although his education suggests otherwise, Stevens has always refuted notions of poshness. Born in Croydon, where he was quickly adopted by two teachers (he's never felt the urge to seek out his birth mother), he went to Tonbridge on a scholarship and his two career-thrusting roles have come as middle-class boys who end up moving in upper-crust circles: Nick Guest in the BBC's 2006 adaptation of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and, of course, Matthew Crawley in *Downton Abbey*. But it was at Cambridge that Stevens was first spotted, in a Footlights production of *Macbeth* opposite Rebecca Hall. Sir Peter Hall, the actress's father, went on to cast Stevens in several productions, including *As You Like It* in 2005, a role that landed him the Ian Charleson Award. Adhering to his tutor's advice, Stevens has also put his English literature degree to good use, founding the literary quarterly *The Junket* and sitting on the 2012 Man Booker Prize judging panel.

Stevens was well aware of Smith's 1996 novel, which had made the teacher something of a local celebrity in and around Tonbridge. "Everybody said, 'this should be a movie,'" recalls the actor. "I remember Jonathan jokingly saying, 'If it ever does become one, you'd make a great Gilbert.' I kept that in the back of my mind." When a fellow Tonbridge pupil, Jeremy Cowdrey, later acquired the film rights, he tracked Stevens down and convinced the actor to attach himself to the project as both producer and star. This was a couple of years before *Downton Abbey*, and Stevens has loyally stuck with it through thick, thin and multiple writers (they eventually hired Smith to adapt his own novel).

As Gilbert Evans, Stevens is portraying a sensitive, thoughtful, quiet man opposite Cooper's loud and charismatic extrovert. "I guess it's one of those characters I play a fair deal, which is the outsider coming in and getting caught up in things," he muses. There are question marks over what really happened, since Carter-Wood has essentially been erased from history. Thirty years after Lamorna, Munnings became a controversial head of the Royal Academy of Art (he's remembered for an incendiary departure speech in which he blasted Modernism and the likes of Picasso); he also wrote a three-volume autobiography in which he didn't mention his first wife once. As Gilbert and Matthew Crawley are cut from the same cloth, was Stevens never tempted to give himself the showier role of Munnings? The



Then and now: Dan Stevens with Emily Browning in 'Summer in February' (left); and with Michelle Dockery in 'Downton Abbey' (below)

30-year-old actor laughs, before admitting hesitantly, "Well, maybe. But I don't think I would have pulled it off nearly as well as Dominic. I'll get to those roles in the fullness of time. Gilbert's quite a good role for me to start out in films with."

Summer in February's £5m budget was raised through private investors, and presumably among them were several *Downton Abbey* fans. It's clear that the show's success has made Stevens a bankable film commodity.

"It's sad to put it in those terms," he shudders, "but I suppose that's right. Although Gilbert is number three on the cast list so I was just about eligible to play number three. Dominic seemed like the right kind of rogue to play Munnings. It's one of the nicest casts I've ever worked with. We've been having a blast." Cooper will later tell me that the cast immersed themselves in the wild, hard-drinking bohemian spirit of their characters during the Cornwall leg of the shoot. Stevens is either too polite to share such tales of on-set debauchery, or didn't partake in these drink-fuelled bonding sessions.

When I spoke to him, he was pulling double-duty on *Summer in February* and the season-three shoot for *Downton Abbey*. He wasn't getting much sleep but didn't let slip that he had already made up his mind to leave the wildly popular series at the end of his three-season contract, still months off ruining Christmas for several millions

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fans when Matthew Crawley crashed his new car in the last scene of the show's festive special. *Downton* writer and creator Julian Fellowes later told *The New York Times* he had wanted to end the Christmas episode on a happy note and kill off Matthew in the first episode of season four, but that Stevens refused to hang about. "I didn't want his death to dominate the Christmas special," Fellowes said, "so that's why we killed him at the very, very end." Displaying less pique than Fellowes, Stevens explained after the episode's airing that he'd made the decision to go before season three even started filming. "We were always optioned for three years," he explained. "It felt like a good time to take stock... I wanted a chance to do other things. It's a very monopolising job."

There was no hint of *Downton* discord on *Summer in February*. Stevens expressed hope that the explosion in the show's pop-

ularity in the US would help the film's prospects, and praised *Downton* as "a fantastically valuable experience and a great ride. I've absolutely loved it." He also gave a sporting chuckle when I raised some of the nuttier plotlines foisted upon Matthew, for instance his miraculous recovery from paralysis and impotence in season two. "I perform what is put in front of me!" he said. "There are some crazy storylines. We only get two scripts at a time so you never quite know where it's going. I'm not sure Julian knows quite until we start shooting and then by episode eight, he may have changed his mind about a few things."

Stevens also excitedly told me that he'd recently been signed by powerful American agency WME. "When signing with someone becomes a headline, that's quite cool, although I was a bit like, 'Really? That's news?'" he laughed. "I'm very, very excited by those guys and they are excited by me.

Things will start to heat up, which is exciting. Watch this space, man." And indeed, since wrapping on *Summer in February* and leaving *Downton*, Stevens has played a heroin trafficker in the Hollywood thriller *A Walk Among the Tombstones* and journalist Ian Katz in the Wikileaks biopic *The Fifth Estate*; delivered an acclaimed stint on Broadway opposite Jessica Chastain in *The Heiress*; and become a father for the second time. His wife is Susie Hariet, a South African jazz singer-turned-teacher.

Stevens is now ensconced in New York with the brood, and his aspirations to break America have seen him hire a personal trainer and shed that *Downton* plumpness in favour of a new slimline look. The world is his oyster, although it remains to be seen how big a part *Summer in February* plays in his ceaseless rise. Back inside the Athenaeum Club, Stevens sits at a lavishly decorated wedding-banquet table and sulks while Cooper, as Munnings, makes an ungallant speech that sends his new bride storming off in tears. Getting up in between takes, Stevens wanders over to mingle with a few of *Summer's* investors, displaying the easy, smiling charm that looks set to take him to ever greater heights.

"It's an unusual one," he muses. "It's not what they call in America 'a Thanksgiving weekend family comedy'. But I think it's a really beautiful, intriguing and heartbreaking story. I like those kind of soulful, tragic, romantic characters. But, yes, maybe a comedy next."

'Summer in February' is released in the UK on 14 June

A CRITICAL VIEW

Tom Sutcliffe/The perfect illustration of how a picture can change a book for you



Agree or disagree? Scan page to vote

The age of the unillustrated book is dying. I know this sounds as if it's the wrong way round. After all, it's the illustrated book that would seem to be a thing of the past, unless you're talking about children's literature. And the fact that you almost certainly would be talking about children's literature is evidence in itself of a shift in fashion, from a time when quite a lot of popular fiction would come with illustrations to a time when it would be a remarkable breach of publishing protocol. Imagine opening Dan Brown's *Inferno* and finding a pencil sketch of his hero, or an interleaved drawing of Istanbul.

The Folio Society's editions often still contain illustrations but the fact that they do is what makes me hesitate to buy them, despite the seductive quality of their bindings and paper. Because, as any sensitive reader knows, a bad illustration – or even just one that doesn't match your own inner eye – can kill the imagination stone dead. And yet books have never been more illustrated, more haunted by the images of the things they describe.

I think I've sensed this for a while but it was Michael Wood's review of Julian Barnes's novel *Levels of Life* in the *London Review of Books* that really brought it home to me. Discussing the second part of Barnes's book – which describes a



Earning his stripes: 'Frederick Gustavus Burnaby' by James Jacques Tissot

love affair between a Victorian adventurer called Fred Burnaby and Sarah Bernhardt – Wood writes, as an aside "if you google him you will see a fine picture of him by Tissot".

And – if you happen to be reading this on an iPad or a laptop – you can almost certainly do the same, with the same insouciant rapidity implied by Wood's dashed interpolation. I did it myself while reading *Levels of Life*, provoked initially by the desire to check whether Burnaby was as real as Bernhardt. But once I had, Tissot's painting of Burnaby, lounging on a sofa with a cigarette canted in his hand and the scarlet stripe of his uniform trousers stroking the length of his legs, was

irretrievably part of the experience of reading Barnes's book.

Fair enough, you might say. Barnes has often referred to real objects and real people in his fictions, and we get nothing from the picture that actively contradicts the verbal portrait he delivers in

TISSOT'S PAINTING WAS PART OF THE EXPERIENCE OF READING BARNES'S BOOK

his book. But this can easily happen in other contexts too.

Reading a German novel about the bombing of Dresden a few years ago, I found myself automatically googling a picture of a famous bridge that the novelist referred to in

passing – an arched span of blue-painted ironwork, which, for some reason, I felt the need to look at directly, rather than just through the filter of her prose. And one of the reasons for that impulse, I'm pretty sure, was an odd desire to check that she'd got it right. Whether she had or hadn't didn't make a bit of difference to the novel itself.

Had it been an entirely invented bridge – rather than a real one that cropped up in an invented history – I wouldn't have felt cheated or misled. But once I knew it was real I had to scratch the itch to look at it.

I've found myself doing it more and more, whether it's checking out the appearance of a particular kind of diesel locomotive while reading Alan Warner's *The Deadman's Pedal* or looking at Panoramio images of some of the Nigerian locations in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's recent *Americanah*. And I still can't work out whether this counts as an enrichment or an undermining distraction.

My prejudice is in favour of the latter, but I'm not convinced that prejudice is going to be able to do anything to enforce its disdain, and even less so as I read more and more on a page that can take me anywhere at the touch of a finger. The age of the unillustrated book is dead.

Gershwin overload gives me the blues



I Twitter-moaned a while ago about the knee-jerk instinct which provokes television producers into pairing archive shots of the New York skyline with Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Afterwards I wondered whether I'd overreacted, but then I sat down to watch Jay McInerney's *Culture Show* special on F. Scott Fitzgerald (tonight on BBC2 at 8.30pm) and within two seconds, those familiar swelling chords were surging across Manhattan streets. And yes... Gershwin (above) is the epitome of the Jazz Age. But it's still a wretched cliché, worn into pointlessness by overuse. The only solution I can see is for the new DG to make it a sacking offence. Absolutely no exceptions.

Nervous breakdown at factory

It was ominous news that previews of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* had been delayed because of malfunctioning stage engineering. Not because they won't get it fixed in time for the first night but because the kind of complex stage-machinery that can push an opening back when it fails to perform is almost invariably a sign that the musical is looking in the

wrong direction for thrills. I seem to remember a massively expensive bit of kit forcing the cancellation of the press night for the musical version of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, only to deliver a creaky, underwhelming *coup de théâtre* when it finally did perform. The levers and hydraulics that should matter most in these things are all inside the human body.