HISTORICAL RESEARCH

The social origins and career patterns of Oxford and Cambridge matriculants, 1840–1900

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Abstract

Education at Oxford and Cambridge universities has invariably been taken in modern times as a prime marker of 'establishment' status. Nevertheless, few searching studies of the social origins and subsequent career patterns among Oxbridge students have been undertaken. This article reports on a study of approximately 100 randomly selected students matriculating each at Oxford and Cambridge universities in 1840, 1870 and 1900 – a total of over 600 students. Precise information on the occupation, status and wealth of the father of each matriculant, their secondary schooling, and subsequent occupation, status and wealth was gathered from a wide variety of sources, many unused before. The picture which emerges is of matriculants drawn for the most part from the lower part of the solid middle classes, with surprisingly few landowners or aristocrats. There were also more businessmen fathers than found in previous studies. Most matriculants subsequently pursued very similar professional careers to their fathers, with extraordinary numbers of Anglican clergymen among the 1840 and 1870 cohorts. Despite the role of Oxbridge as the nursery of Cabinet ministers and the Whitehall-City elite, its function as the progenitor of modern Britain's elites is somewhat ambiguous, and it did not automatically provide a route to the very top.

For many centuries, Oxford and Cambridge universities have been at the heart of all that is connoted by the 'British establishment'. The evidence for this is so well known and plentiful that reciting it is virtually pointless: since 1850, for example, eighteen of twenty-six prime ministers have attended one or another of the two old English universities, while, in the twentieth century, sixty per cent of all cabinet ministers were products of Oxbridge, as have been most senior civil servants, judges, Anglican bishops and a disproportionate percentage of Britain's intelligentsia, however defined.[1] Until Tony Blair's resignation in June 2007, despite the enormous growth in the university system in recent decades, both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition were Oxford graduates.

Despite this illustrious record, one self-evidently important for our understanding of Britain's elite structure, only a limited number of studies have attempted to examine either the social backgrounds or the career outcomes of statistically significant samples of Oxbridge entrants, and none in a genuinely searching way which goes well

[1] See H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society in England since 1880* (1989); W. Ellis, *The Oxbridge Conspiracy: How the Ancient Universities have Kept their Stranglehold on the Establishment* (1995) discusses the continuing ascendancy of Oxbridge; W. D. Rubinstein 'Education and the social origins of British elites, 1880–1970', *Past & Present*, cxii (1986), 163–207 (repr. in W. D. Rubinstein, *Elites and the Wealthy in Modern British Society* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 172–221); J. Scott, *Who Rules Britain?* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 124–35; J. Paxman, *Friends in High Places – Who Runs Britain?* (1991).

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beyond what can be inferred from published collective biographies of alumni.[2] In this study random samples of 100 matriculants from each university entering in 1840, 1870 and 1900 have been chosen from the matriculants' registers.[3] The name, occupation and probate valuation of the father of each individual was then ascertained, along with other biographical information, as was the occupation, probate valuation and so on of the matriculants themselves.[4] The aim of this study has been to ascertain the social backgrounds of Oxbridge matriculants during the Victorian era, as well as the crucial question of what effect an Oxbridge education had on the career opportunities of its students. What was the relationship between Oxbridge and Britain's elite structure during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Did Oxbridge enhance the chances of reaching the top? Were there discernible differences between Oxford and Cambridge?

As noted above, the names of matriculants in this study were chosen on a random basis from the matriculants' registers of both universities, and traced comprehensively in a wide variety of sources. The aim in every case was to identify the occupation, date of death and probate valuation of the father of each man; and salient biographical data for the matriculants themselves, including information about secondary schooling, occupation and career pattern, and date of death and probate valuation. Although some of this information is readily available in published reference works,

[2] Certainly the most impressive such study is M. C. Curthoys and J. Howarth, 'Origins and destinations: the social mobility of Oxford men and women', in M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys, *The History of the University of Oxford*, vii: *19th-Century Oxford, Pt. 2* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 571–95. This article does not, however, employ the range of sources used in this present study, although it provides useful information on cohorts of Oxford matriculants entering in 1818/19, 1848/9, 1878/9 and 1897/8, and Oxford women matriculants of 1881–1913. (Women matriculants are not included in this study. They certainly demand a separate, searching study which this author hopes eventually to undertake.) The Curthoys/Howarth article, of course, does not include Cambridge matriculants. Another important study in the same volume is J. R. De S. Honey and M. C. Curthoys, 'Oxford and schooling', in Brock and Curthoys, pp. 545–69. Some information on Cambridge matriculants (and teachers) is found in 'The society', in C. N. L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, iv: *1870–1990* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 240–300, esp. pp. 287–300 and, for the earlier period, in the 'Appendices' to P. Searby, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, iii: *1750–1870* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 730–45. See also the appendices (pp. 638–52) in V. Green, *The Commonwealth of Lincoln College [(Oxford)], 1429–1977* (Oxford, 1979).

[3] The author is most grateful to the archivists of both universities for allowing him to copy out (or, in the case of Cambridge, obtain a microfilm copy) of the relevant matriculants' registers for 1840, 1870 and 1900. This project was funded by the British Academy (SG 35122), to which the author is enormously grateful. A subsequent small grant from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth's University Research Fund allowed him to complete the research, and again he is most grateful. The author's long-time research assistant in London, Dr. Carole M. Taylor, ably undertook most of the research on probate valuations in the principal probate registry. The random sample of matriculants employed here consisted of taking every third name until 100 names were reached in each university year. Occasionally, slightly more than 100 names were included in each sample, and the extras retained. Strictly speaking, this procedure does not produce a random sample, which should be obtained by employing a table of random numbers. But matriculants were recorded in chronological order, according to no apparent pattern, and the author can see no reason to suppose that the samples employed here are anything other than random. There were 2,019 undergraduates at Cambridge in 1869–70 and 2,983 in 1900–1 (Brooke, pp. 593–4), suggesting that this study employs a roughly one-in-seven sample for the earlier cohorts and a one-in-ten sample for the 1900 cohort. There were somewhat fewer students at Oxford than at Cambridge, meaning that the Oxford samples are a somewhat higher percentage of the totals.

[4] Both universities have well-known, large-scale printed alumni registers (*Alumni Cantabrigiensis: a Biographical List . . . to 1900*, comp. J and J. A. Venn (2 pts. in 10 vols., Cambridge, 1922–54); and *Alumni Oxonienses: the Members of the University of Oxford, 1715–1886*, comp. J. Foster (4 vols., Oxford, 1887–8)). Venn's magnificent collection is surely one of the most impressive works of collective biography ever compiled in Britain, and is far more detailed than Foster's skeletal register. Nevertheless, even Venn does not always provide sufficient information on the fathers of matriculants, and omits information (including dates of death) of many matriculants. Many of those in the 1900 Cambridge cohort in this study died after the completion of Venn's work. Some Oxbridge colleges have also published their own alumni registers. This study, to reiterate, has gone considerably beyond the published registers.

it is unavailable in any published source for the majority of matriculants, and had to be meticulously traced in other sources, including birth, marriage and death certificates, local directories, census records and, arduously, in the probate calendars. This methodology closely parallels that employed in all of this author's previous studies of elite groups and wealth-holders in Britain, and the data amassed here is fully comparable with those in previous books and articles. What, then, has been found about Oxbridge?

There are various ways of assessing the social origins of elite groups, none wholly satisfactory. In this author's previous studies of the social origins of elite groups, for example the analysis of random samples of public school entrants in 1840, 1870 and 1900, a seven-scale system of social status has been primarily employed, which provides a greater degree of differentiation among very high status groups than in other classificatory schemas.[5] The highest level of social background, Level I, comprises top landowners (those with 3,000 or more acres); top businessmen, including all those leaving £50,000 or more before 1939; the very top professionals (judges, bishops, professors, etc.); and all titled persons.[6] Level II comprises small landowners (1–3,000 acres or mentioned in *Burke's Landed Gentry*); businessmen leaving £10–50,000 or holding an equivalent position; and middle-ranking professionals, public servants, etc. Level III consists of small businessmen, very low professionals and farmers. Level IV comprises the lower middle class of clerks, ordinary teachers in state schools and small shopkeepers. Levels V, VI and VII comprise skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers.[7] This classificatory schema also employs a horizontal axis, which divides into the broad occupational categories of landowners, professionals and businessmen.

Table 1 shows the social class of Oxbridge matriculants. A number of significant points emerge. Although important, the number of fathers of the very highest status is probably less than the popular image would credit; in particular, there were fewer great landowners and more businessmen-fathers than might be imagined, and with businessmen-fathers consistently growing slightly in number. The bulk of fathers were drawn from a somewhat lower portion of the social scale, from the ranks of ordinary Anglican vicars, schoolmasters, solicitors, doctors and small businessmen – groups still regarded as enjoying considerable social prestige in their community, but not national prestige or significance, or great wealth. As expected, there appears to have been a virtually absolute class barrier among the fathers of Oxbridge matriculants, with only a small handful drawn from the working classes, even in the 1900 cohort when some scholarship assistance to the ablest and luckiest working-class students was available. While the two universities showed broadly similar patterns, there were differences, with Cambridge drawing from a wider and perhaps slightly lower social stratum than Oxford, at least in the context of the British upper and middle classes.

The number of landowners has probably been overestimated in previous studies of the social backgrounds of Oxbridge students, and the number of businessmen underestimated. For instance, the study by M. C. Curthoys and Janet Howarth of 'Origins and destinations: the social mobility of Oxford men and women', which

[5] See Rubinstein, 'Education and the social origins of British elites', esp. p. 178.

[6] Rubinstein, 'Education and the social origins of British elites'. All close relatives of titled persons, and all those with fathers or grandfathers who served in parliament, are also classified here.

[7] Rubinstein, 'Education and the social origins of British elites'. These occupational designations are the highest rank obtained by each man, so far as this can be ascertained.

Table 1. Social class of the fathers of Oxbridge matriculants

Cambridge 1840

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	6	1	2	9 (10.2%)
II	9	11	2	22 (25.0%)
III	6	34	11	51 (58.0%)
IV	3	0	3	6 (6.8%)
Total	**24 (27.3%)**	**46 (52.3%)**	**18 (20.5%)**	**88**

'Gentlemen', 'of Independent Means', etc. = 3
Unknown = 10
Known = 91
Anglican clergymen = 21 (23.1%)

Cambridge 1870

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	3	5	16	24 (26.1%)
II	7	21	7	35 (38.0%)
III	2	23	7	32 (34.8%)
IV	0	0	1	1 (1.1%)
Total	**12 (13.0%)**	**49 (53.3%)**	**31 (33.7%)**	**92**

'Independent Means', etc. = 4
Unknown = 5
Known = 96
Anglican clergymen = 30 (31.3%)

Cambridge 1900

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	0	4	12	16 (16.3%)
II	1 (1.0%)	24	16	41 (41.8%)
III	3 (3.1%)	23	10	36 (36.7%)
IV	0	0	3	3 (3.1%)
V	0	0	2	2 (2.0%)
Total	**4 (4.1%)**	**51 (52.0%)**	**43 (43.9%)**	**98**

'Gentlemen' = 1
Unknown = 1
Known = 99
Anglican clergymen = 19 (19.4%)

Table 1. *Continued.*

Oxford 1840

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	3	10	6	19 (20.7%)
II	11	19	5	35 (38.0%)
III	1	31	5	37 (40.2%)
IV	1	0	0	1 (1.1%)
Total	**16 (17.4%)**	**60 (65.2%)**	**16 (17.4%)**	**92**

'Esquire' = 1
Unknown = 10
Known = 92
Anglican clergymen = 31 (33.7%)

Oxford 1870

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	7	2	8	17 (17.5%)
II	5	10	6	21 (21.6%)
III	4	45	10	59 (60.8%)
Total	**16 (16.5%)**	**57 (58.8%)**	**24 (24.7%)**	**97**

Unknown = 4
Known = 97
Anglican clergymen = 24 (24.7%)

Oxford 1900

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	3	5	20	28 (28.6%)
II	3	13	8	24 (24.5%)
III	0	33	12	45 (45.9%)
IV	0	0	1	1 (1.0%)
Total	**6 (6.1%)**	**51 (52.0%)**	**41 (41.8%)**	**98**

'Esquire' = 2
Known = 100
Anglican clergymen = 12 (12%)
Ranks IV–VII have no examples unless indicated.

examines matriculants entering Oxford in 1818/19, 1848/9, 1878/9 and 1897/8, found that the percentages of male matriculants' fathers described as 'landowners, no profession', were, respectively, twenty-three, twenty-three, eighteen and twelve per cent.[8] These are consistently higher than the percentage of landowner fathers found in this study.

[8] Curthoys and Howarth, table 24.1, p. 578.

Possibly – as is common in such analyses – fathers given as living in a country house, described as 'J.P.', 'D.L.' or the like, were assumed to have been bona fide landowners, when many were in fact local solicitors or businessmen. In this present study, however, the number of genuine landowners was actually rather small, with the proportion of landed aristocrats almost vanishingly small. For instance, among the Oxford 1870 sample, only four fathers of matriculants were titled landed aristocrats, one by creation in his lifetime.[9] Although three others were untitled great landowners, the number of landed fathers with genuinely substantial acreages was certainly lower than many suppose, and moreover declined steadily at both universities. Among the Cambridge 1900 cohort, not a single father in the sample was a genuine great landowner.

Conversely, the number of businessmen-fathers has been underestimated in previous studies. In the Curthoys and Howarth study, the percentage of fathers of male matriculants described as 'Business (Owners/Managers)' was put at, respectively, twelve, nine, eighteen and twenty-seven per cent.[10] These appear to be substantially lower than the actual percentages, especially for the last of the three cohorts in this study, where more than forty per cent of fathers at both Oxford and Cambridge were businessmen.[11] The cause of these underestimates may lie in the reluctance of matriculants, or the alumni registers, to record all businessmen-fathers, although Venn's Cambridge alumni registers are usually both frank and searching. Nevertheless, employing local directories, the probate records and works such as the *Directory of Directors* confirms that businessmen-fathers were increasingly numerous.

A few matriculants in this study emerged from below the lowest part of the middle classes, but only a tiny handful. The father of Gwilym Ungoed Thomas (1879–1959), a Cambridge matriculant of 1900, was a roll-turner in a Llanelli tin works. His well-known classmate, Herbert (later Sir Herbert) Emerson (1881–1962), who eventually became the governor of Punjab from 1933 to 1938 and then the League of Nations high commissioner for refugees, was the son of Stephen Emerson of West Kirby, Cheshire, described on his son's birth certificate as a 'keeper of dogs (domestic)', who left £121 in 1900; his mother was described on the birth certificate as a 'gardener'. There were a handful of other examples of remarkable upward social mobility of this kind, but not many, and certainly not more than a few per cent of the total.

[9] Namely, Charles, 2nd Baron Garvagh (an Irish peer); Sir Charles Strickland, 8th Bt.; Francis, 9th duke of Bedford; and William Wallace Hozier, a Glasgow landowner (and the uncle of Lady Clementine Churchill), who was created 1st Baron Newlands in 1898. There were about 700 peers in Britain in 1900 (591 of whom were, in 1900, entitled to sit in the house of lords). If each, on average, had four sons, two of whom attended Oxbridge, then over a generation of 30 years about 47 would have matriculated at Oxbridge in any year, or around 23 per university per year. The number of aristocrat-sons found in the samples here are thus consistent with the size of our samples compared with the overall number of Oxbridge matriculants. The point here is that the number of possible aristocrat-sons who could have matriculated at Oxbridge is extraordinarily small. That most Oxbridge students were far from aristocratic or wealthy was common knowledge among Oxbridge academics. According to a memorandum by Peter Giles, master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, undated but apparently written just after the First World War, 'It has frequently been complained that the cost of education in the residential universities of Oxford and Cambridge renders access to them possible only for the rich. This has never been true, and at all times the bulk of students were drawn from the sons of clergymen, doctors, and other professional men whose means were often strained to provide their sons with a university education' (cited in T. E. B. Howarth, *Cambridge Between Two Wars* (1978), p. 65).

[10] Curthoys and Howarth.

[11] The number of small shopkeepers and clerks – included in a small separate category in the Curthoys and Howarth study – totalled two among the Oxford cohorts in this study, and nine at Cambridge.

The fathers of most Oxbridge matriculants were professional men, particularly Anglican clergymen, who comprised nearly one-quarter of the total – seventy out of 285 (24.6 per cent) of all Cambridge fathers and sixty-seven out of 289 (23.2 per cent) of all Oxford fathers. Until the late nineteenth century, Anglican vicars comprised, pre-eminently, the most important single segment from whose ranks Oxbridge matriculants were drawn. Anglican clergymen-fathers, however, diminished rapidly in the 1900 cohorts, declining from thirty-one to nineteen per cent of Cambridge fathers in 1870 and from twenty-five to twelve per cent of Oxford fathers in the same period. The remaining professional fathers were drawn from a wide spectrum of the solid and conventional middle classes. Among the 1870 Cambridge cohort, for instance, eight fathers were solicitors, two barristers (one a judge), five professional army officers, two schoolteachers and one a physician. One (the Revd. Henry Griffiths, the father of Ernest Howard Griffiths (1851–1932), who became vice-chancellor of the University of Wales) was an Independent minister and principal of a college in Brecon run by the Independents. Like him, a small but steady stream of non-Anglican clergymen appeared among the matriculants' fathers as the universities became more open to practising non-Anglicans.[12] The 1900 Oxford cohort, for instance, included the sons of Wesleyan, Congregational and Free Church of Scotland ministers, as well as of a rabbi, while the 1900 Cambridge cohort included the sons of two Congregationalists and a Presbyterian (in Northern Ireland) minister.[13] The presence of the sons of the chapel and manse as well as sons of the vicarage might have compensated for the decline in the number of the offspring of Anglican clergymen.

A more common mode of analysis of the social backgrounds of any group of British people in modern times has regularly been their secondary schooling, probably because this is much easier to trace in standard reference works than the occupations of their fathers or other relatives. Invariably, education at an 'elite' public school, and especially the famous old public schools such as Eton, Harrow, Winchester and Rugby, is taken as virtually co-definitional with and an accurate proxy for the class background, status and wealth of that man's father and family. While this may be accurate in some sense, the use of secondary education to infer the social background of its students also raises many difficulties. Most public schools in this period can be shown quite convincingly to have catered for the middle classes rather than the upper classes: only Eton and Harrow drew significant numbers of students from among bona fide aristocrats and the very wealthy.[14] The secondary education of the matriculants in this study is set out in Table 2.

It will be seen that the secondary education of a surprisingly large component of the earlier cohorts could not be found in any source. While fewer Oxford matriculants could be traced than Cambridge matriculants, even the very careful research of Venn

[12] As is well known, until the early 1870s matriculants at Oxford and graduates at Cambridge were required to signify their acceptance of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Anglicanism before proceeding or taking their degree. Some non-Anglicans were always prepared to accept these tests in order to gain entry or to graduate, but of course their number would have grown in the late 19th century.

[13] The rabbi was Isidore Simon of Southampton and Manchester, whose son, Leon (later Sir) Simon (1881–1965), became director of the G.P.O. Savings Bank, and, from 1950 to 1953, president of the Israel Post Office Bank. His success at Oxford – he graduated with a first in Classics moderations from Balliol and won the Ireland and Craven scholarships – illustrates the remarkable openness of the older universities after the reforms of the 1870s.

[14] W. D. Rubinstein, *Capitalism, Culture, and Decline in Britain, 1750–1990* (1993), pp. 102–39; Rubinstein, 'Education and the social origins of British elites'.

Table 2. Secondary schooling of Oxbridge matriculants, by number

	1840		1870		1900	
	Cambridge	Oxford	Cambridge	Oxford	Cambridge	Oxford
Eton	4	10	6	9	6	13
Harrow	4	3	12	4	6	4
Winchester	2	2	1	4	5	8
Rugby	4	5	4	5	0	2
Clarendon boarding	5	3	2	0	1	0
Clarendon day	5	4	4	1	2	8
[C, C, M, W]*	0	0	8	7	10	11
Other top boarding	4	2	12	4	30	21
Other top day	6	3	7	6	8	8
Other schools	24	6	14	7	27	25
Unknown	41	65	31	54	5	2
Total	**100**	**102**	**100**	**101**	**100**	**100**

* Cheltenham, Clifton, Marlborough, Wellington.

and his colleagues could not identify the secondary schooling of large numbers of earlier Cambridge matriculants. Presumably none of these unknowns attended an 'elite' public school, however, and probably all matriculants who attended such an 'elite' school have been traced.

Attendance at a recognizably elite secondary school was surprisingly rare, with fewer than six per cent of all matriculants having gone to Eton, and fewer than four per cent having been educated at Harrow. Most Oxbridge matriculants were educated at a school regarded, in the popular mind, as of a somewhat lower social cachet. Significant numbers attended Cheltenham, Clifton, Marlborough and Wellington, probably the most prestigious public schools to have been founded in the nineteenth century, and any of a range of good public schools below the very top.[15] A smaller number attended grammar schools, and a wide range of minor public schools is also represented. The findings here appear to be very consistent with the statistics of the social class of the fathers of the matriculants: surprisingly few, at least in comparison with the popular image, emerged from the genuine aristocracy, plutocracy or senior and prestigious professionals, but many came from the lower parts of the middle classes, with vicars, schoolmasters, solicitors and the like comprising the bulk. This is also fairly consistent with the conclusions of Honey and Curthoys, who found that fifty-nine per cent of men matriculating at Oxford in both 1895–8 and 1911–14 were educated at a public school, with twelve to thirteen per cent coming from a 'fringe' public school.[16] Using somewhat different criteria, they also found that fifty-four per cent of Oxford matriculants and fifty-two per cent of Cambridge matriculants entering in 1902–4/5 had attended a public school, and another twelve to thirteen

[15] At Cambridge in 1900, for instance, matriculants were drawn from the following 'good' public schools (both boarding and day), not grouped elsewhere in Table 2: Bedford, Berkhamstead, Bootham, Blundells, Bradfield, Dover, Dulwich, Eastbourne, Felsted, Highgate, Malvern, Mill Hill, Oundle, Radley, Repton, Rossall, Sedburgh, Tonbridge, University College School and Uppingham.

[16] Honey and Curthoys, p. 552.

per cent a 'fringe' public school.[17] In this study, while attendance at a public school certainly increased between 1840 and 1900, the percentage of matriculants who were educated at a very prestigious public school, those seen as synonymous in the popular mind with aristocratic status or great wealth, simply did not markedly increase, and certainly never constituted more than a minority of all matriculants.

Tracing the subsequent careers of the matriculants themselves presents many difficulties for the historian. This is especially so for Oxford students: the Oxford alumni register is skeletal and inadequate, in contrast to Venn's *Alumni Cantabrigiensis* which is, in general, extraordinarily detailed. Nevertheless, by employing a range of sources including census and probate records, local and professional directories, death certificates and so on, information about the careers of virtually 100 per cent of the Cambridge samples and over ninety per cent of the Oxford samples has been obtained. This is set out in Table 3, in the same format as the data for the matriculants' fathers.

It will immediately be seen that the great majority of Oxbridge matriculants among all six cohorts became professional men. Strikingly, more than sixty per cent of the 1840 cohorts at both universities became Anglican clergymen, an extraordinary finding to those who are not familiar with the previous research that has been conducted on this subject.[18] The percentage of Anglican clergymen among subsequent cohorts declined steadily, but, at both universities, still comprised nearly twenty per

Table 3. Social class of Oxbridge matriculants

Cambridge sons 1840

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	3	2	2	7 (7.1%)
II	7	8	2	17 (17.2%)
III	6	69	0	75 (75.8%)
Total	**16 (16.2%)**	**79 (79.8%)**	**4 (4.0%)**	**99**

Unknown = 1
Anglican clergymen = 66 (66.7%)

Cambridge sons 1870

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	4	11	7	22 (22.2%)
II	5	19	0	24 (24.2%)
III	2	50	1	53 (53.5%)
Total	**11 (11.1%)**	**80 (80.8%)**	**8 (8.1%)**	**99**

'Independent Means' = 2
Anglican clergymen = 38 (38.4%)

[17] Honey and Curthoys, p. 554. The authors offered no statistics on the earlier period, nor any distinguishing Eton and the other very prestigious public schools.

[18] See, in particular, the important study by A. Haig, *The Victorian Clergy* (1984). The findings in this study are very similar to those in Haig, pp. 335–48.

Table 3. *Continued.*

Cambridge sons 1900

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	0	13	7	20 (20.2%)
II	1	29	6	36 (36.4%)
III	1	39	3	43 (43.4%)
Total	**2 (2.0%)**	**81 (81.9%)**	**16 (16.2%)**	**99**

'Independent Means' = 1
Anglican clergymen = 20 (20.2%)

Oxford sons 1840

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	1	6	2	9 (9.9%)
II	4	17	1	22 (24.2%)
III	4	56	0	60 (65.9%)
Total	**9 (9.9%)**	**79 (86.8%)**	**3 (3.3%)**	**91**

Unknown = 11
'Esquire' = 1
Anglican clergymen = 61 (59.2%)

Oxford sons 1870

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	5	6	2	13 (15.1%)
II	2	12	0	14 (16.3%)
III	2	56	1	59 (68.6%)
Total	**9 (10.5%)**	**74 (86.0%)**	**3 (3.5%)**	**86**

'Independent Means', etc. = 7
Unknown = 7
Anglican clergymen = 2,394 (41.9%)

Oxford sons 1900

	Land	Professionals	Business	Number
I	3	9	5	17 (18.5%)
II	3	23	9	35 (38.0%)
III	1	39	0	40 (43.5%)
Total	**7 (7.6%)**	**71 (77.2%)**	**14 (15.2%)**	**92**

'Independent Means' = 2
Unknown = 7
Anglican clergymen = 19 (18.8%)

cent of the 1900 groupings, probably the largest single occupational destination. Most clergymen-graduates were parish vicars and rectors serving in very ordinary clerical posts for many years and leaving no public mark of any kind.[19] Some ascended the Anglican hierarchy to become canons, prebendaries, rural deans or the like, while a certain proportion combined a clerical career with school teaching or headmastership.[20] A number made a mark by writing works of scholarship or history, or engaging in religious debate, but their numbers were small.

The 1840 cohorts – men who would have graduated in 1843–4 – entered the Anglican church at the zenith of the period of early Victorian religiosity, during the national debate over the 'Oxford movement' and at a time when Anglican clerical numbers were rapidly rising. In this period, there were few other choices which allowed a young graduate to enter a high status, probably tenured profession, which paid an income, albeit a meagre one, from the first.[21] Many clergymen, too, especially in rural communities, were regarded as *ipso facto* part of the squirearchy, and were almost automatically influential figures. By the end of the century, however, there were many fewer clergymen and a much wider range of professional occupations. The Cambridge 1900 cohort, for instance, saw a recognizably modern and familiar range of professional careers among its graduates. While twenty men became Anglican clergymen, eight became barristers, six solicitors, ten physicians or surgeons, three entered the home civil service and nine the Indian or colonial civil service, two became diplomats, eight schoolmasters, five university academics and three professional army officers, while a smaller number of professions, including accountancy, meteorology and journalism, attracted individuals.[22]

Whether in the earlier form of clerical careers, or the later more diverse occupational pathways, as noted above most Oxbridge graduates entered the professions. This leads to another central question, much debated among economic and social historians, that of the so-called 'haemorrhage of talent' among the sons of successful businessmen. According to a well-known and oft-repeated critique of British entrepreneurship, the sons of successful, hard-nosed, often self-made Victorian businessmen, especially industrialists, were regularly educated at leading public schools and the two old universities, receiving a Classical education as 'gentlemen' which utterly unfitted them for the rough-and-tumble of business life. Probably the best-known exponent of this view, M. J. Wiener, claimed, specifically of the public schools (not the universities), that 'However many businessmen's sons entered, few future businessmen emerged from these schools, and those who did were "civilised"; that is, detached from the single-minded pursuit of production and profit'.[23] This author's analysis of the social

[19] E.g., (Revd.) Thomas Dove (1821–1906; Cambridge 1840) 'never failed to take Sunday service at Cowbit [Lincolnshire] for forty-four years' (Venn). His classmate, (Revd.) Henry Kirby (1818–97), and previously, his father and, subsequently, his son, served as vicars of Mayfield, Sussex, for 102 consecutive years between 1810 and 1912 (Venn).

[20] E.g., (Revd.) George Butler (1819–90; Oxford 1840), the son of Harrow headmaster (Revd.) George Butler, who became principal of Liverpool College but is probably better known through his wife, the campaigner for prostitutes Josephine Butler.

[21] Although the rewards for young clergymen without well-connected patrons were often very meagre, as Haig, pp. 54–71, 249–76 makes clear, and as is obvious from the often tiny size of the estates left by many clergymen.

[22] The journalist was none other than Alan Alexander Milne (A. A. Milne, 1882–1956), who was assistant editor of *Punch* from 1906 to 1914, but, of course, achieved lasting fame as the author of *Winnie the Pooh* (1926). He was also a successful novelist and playwright.

[23] M. J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 31.

Table 4. Businessmen fathers and matriculants by cohorts

Cambridge		Fathers	Matriculants
	1840	18 (19.8%)	4 (4.0%)
	1870	31 (32.3%)	8 (7.9%)
	1900	43 (43.9%)	16 (16.0%)
Subtotal		**92**	**28**
Oxford		Fathers	Matriculants
	1840	16 (17.4%)	3 (3.3%)
	1870	24 (24.7%)	3 (3.5%)
	1900	41 (41.0%)	14 (15.4%)
Subtotal		**81**	**20**
Total both universities		**173**	**48**

backgrounds and career patterns of entrants at eight major public schools in 1840, 1870 and 1900, organized and researched in virtually identical ways to this study of Oxbridge, found that there was a considerable intergenerational decline in the number of sons of businessmen who themselves pursued a career as businessmen, although probably not to the extent that might be supposed. It would seem that while 568 fathers of public school entrants in this study were businessmen, 329 sons (fifty-eight per cent) followed their example.[24] The decline among the university cohorts was, however, much more precipitous, as Table 4 makes clear.

There was thus a decrease of about seventy-one per cent in the intergenerational career choices as businessmen, considerably higher than among the public school samples at precisely the same time. The decline was more marked at Oxford than at Cambridge. As with the professional sons and the move away from the church to a more diversified choice of careers, business life appears to have become more acceptable and common in the late nineteenth century than earlier.

The reasons for this very significant intergenerational decline in business careers are probably complex. Attendance at Oxbridge in the late nineteenth century was restricted to a self-selected handful of a few thousand young men who chose to attend (or were given little choice), in preference to entering employment (or training, for instance, as a solicitor or army officer) after leaving school. Most of those who were required in the family firm, or wished to make a business career, would have done so at eighteen without proceeding to a university. Probably the most intellectually able students attended a university, as would almost all young men with an Anglican religious commitment. As with the choice of careers among public school graduates, one cause of the intergenerational decline arguably consisted of a persisting demographic illusion, by which the third, fourth and fifth sons of businessmen, superfluous to the family firm, attended university and entered a profession.[25] Another major factor is

[24] Rubinstein, *Capital, Culture, and Decline*, p. 120.
[25] Rubinstein, *Capital, Culture, and Decline*, p. 121.

that many sons of professional men (whether they attended a university or not) merely followed in their father's footsteps, entering the church, the law, the military or the civil service just as their fathers had done.

Nevertheless, there were also many factors specific to university life which must have worked against the choice of a business career. There was no ready nexus at nineteenth-century Oxbridge between the universities and business life: there were no business recruiters or career advisers, so far as is known. Subjects even tangentially related to business, such as economics, would have been taken by few students until the end of the century and lacked the prestige of the older honours courses. Many poorer students were compelled by necessity to find a secure job from the first, and could not afford to engage in risk-taking pursuits. The centrality of Anglican religiosity to the old universities until the eighteen-seventies or later presumably also worked against the choice of a business career, although more empirical evidence is surely needed about this.

Education at Oxbridge, however, was not always inconsistent with great success in a business career, and there are some remarkable examples of Oxbridge-educated businessmen, even among these limited samples. For instance, George John Fenwick (1821–1913; Oxford 1840) was the son of a banker in Newcastle-upon-Tyne who left £6,000 when he died in 1852. The son became a leading banker (Lambton & Co.) and brewer in Newcastle, and left £1.1 million at his death; he was certainly among the richest businessmen in England. Charles Micklem (1882–1959; Oxford 1900), the son of a Brazilian railway company secretary, became a prominent and successful stockbroker and is one of the few with an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Probably the most famous businessman in the samples here was Walter Leaf (1852–1927; Cambridge 1870), the son of an export warehouseman in the City; he became chairman of the London and Westminster Bank and was one of the founders of the London chamber of commerce. Leaf, a noted Classicist (he produced a new translation of *The Iliad*), was an archetypal example of a cultured City man who combined learning with business acumen. Nor was this combination possible only in the more genteel City world of 'gentlemanly capitalism', but could be seen even in industry and manufacturing. Charles (later Sir Charles) Mander (1852–1929; Cambridge 1870) became chairman and managing director of Mander Brothers, the well-known family firm of paint and varnish manufacturers, and served as mayor of Wolverhampton for four years. In an apparently increasing number of cases, such successful career choices were possible.

A comparison of the occupational status of fathers and sons also raises a central question posed by this study: what effect did education at Oxbridge have upon the ultimate status of its students? Paradoxically, in terms of achieving the highest rank, the answer would appear to be that an Oxbridge education slightly decreased the number of very high achieving entrants. This was so because many fathers of Oxbridge matriculants themselves emerged from the top ranks of society, or had achieved very high status, attainments which their sons simply could not match. Even in the case of the offspring of aristocratic or very wealthy fathers, these were often younger sons who inherited very little. As can be seen from Tables 1 and 3, among five of the six cohorts there were fewer sons classified as Status I, the highest, than their fathers (the exception being among Cambridge 1900 sons). The decline was relatively small among Cambridge sons but more marked among Oxford matriculants. There was also a similar, noticeable decline among Status II fathers and sons with, again, five of the six cohorts showing a decrease (Oxford 1900 being the exception). Among Status

III fathers and sons, there was a marked increase among most of the cohorts (Oxford 1900 being the exception), the effect produced by so many sons becoming very ordinary Anglican vicars, schoolmasters, minor colonial officials and the like.

To be sure, there were some extraordinary examples of upward social mobility across the generations, and it must be realized that it was not necessarily the sons of very successful fathers who themselves achieved great success. Certainly the most unquestionable example of spectacular achievement in public life among our samples is that of Prime Minister Herbert H. Asquith (1852–1928), who by sheer chance appears among our sample of Oxford matriculants of 1870. Asquith was the son of Joseph Dixon Asquith, a small Congregationalist woollen-manufacturer in Morley, Yorkshire, who died when his son was eight, leaving only £450. Through the generosity of relatives, Asquith was able to attend the City of London School, an excellent day public school with a particularly enlightened headmaster, and he became one of Benjamin Jowett's stars at Balliol before launching a career as one of England's leading barristers and eventually prime minister.

Other matriculants in these samples also reached the highest places in a range of activities, for instance as judges, permanent under-secretaries in the civil service, ambassadors and bishops. Perhaps eight or ten, from these random samples of barely 600, became household names, at least to some, among them the explorer and author Sir Richard Burton (1821–90; Oxford 1840); the composer Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924; Cambridge 1840); the legal historian Sir Henry Maine (1822–88; Cambridge 1840); and, as noted, A. A. Milne.[26] Nevertheless, these stand out as the exception, not the rule.

Information can also be provided about the wealth of both the fathers and the matriculants, as measured by the probate valuations of the principal probate registry in London.[27] There are limitations to their use: they record only wealth at death; while pre-1858 probate valuations exist, they are not located in a single place and the difficulties in their use meant that no pre-1858 valuations could be included here; and before 1898 all land, and from 1898 to 1925 all settled land, is excluded from the valuation figures and had to be estimated from other sources. Nevertheless, they do provide the only consistent information about the wealth of any individual or group in modern Britain, and are objective and comprehensive.[28] The probate valuations of all matriculants in this study and their fathers deceased after 1857 were traced for this article. While only a minority of early fathers could be traced, and there are inevitably some omissions, for the latter cohorts virtually all probate valuations could be found.[29]

[26] Others were also notable more indirectly for their relations: among those in these samples are the fathers of Graham Wallace and Ian Fleming, and the husband of Josephine Butler (see above, n. 20).

[27] These record the values of all estates probated in England and Wales since 1858. They are presently held at First Avenue House, High Holborn, London. A number of Scottish and Irish probates were also added to the tables here, as necessary.

[28] The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* routinely records the probate valuations for every subject deceased since 1858. On the probate valuation, see W. D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: the Very Wealthy in Britain since the Industrial Revolution* (1981); and Rubinstein, *Capitalism, Culture, and Decline*, pp. 102–40.

[29] Among the Cambridge fathers and matriculants, for instance, the numbers traced were as follows: 1840 – fathers 31, matriculants 91; 1870 – fathers 85, matriculants 100; 1900 – fathers 87, sons 94. Apart from dying before 1858, reasons for the failure to trace a valuation include the commonness of some names, possible migration abroad and legal or de facto change of name. Much of the arduous work of tracing these valuations was carried out by Dr. Carole Taylor. It must be appreciated that the dates of death of many persons in this study were not known from any published source, and had to be individually traced in the annual probate calendars, often for many years and entailing hard and difficult work.

Table 5. Value of estates of fathers and matriculants

Median value of estate – current values

Cambridge		Fathers	Matriculants	Percentage fathers/sons
	1840	£16,630	£5,128	30.8%
	1870	£12,800	£9,059	70.8%
	1900	£7,752	£9,420	121.5%
Oxford		Fathers	Matriculants	Percentage fathers/sons
	1840	£27,500	£4,000	14.5%
	1870	£9,297	£3,627	39.0%
	1900	£10,841	£19,971	184.2%

Constant median value of estate

Cambridge		Fathers	Matriculants	Percentage fathers/sons
	1840	£16,224	£5,636	34.7%
	1870	£11,658	£5,141	44.1%
	1900	£5,134	£2,610	50.8%
Oxford		Fathers	Matriculants	Percentage fathers/sons
	1840	£25,000	£4,365	17.5%
	1870	£10,535	£2,231	21.2%
	1900	£7,268	£1,921	26.4%

Table 5 records the median probate valuations of the estates left by the fathers of matriculants and the matriculants themselves, in both current and constant terms.[30] Since comprehensive traceable data exists only since 1858, these tables omit many early fathers. The capital value of land, excluded from the probate valuations until 1898 (unsettled land) and 1926 (settled land), has been added from the *Return of Owners of Land* of 1872–5. It is clear from these tables that education at Oxbridge did not engender economic success; indeed, in constant terms, Oxbridge matriculants in most cases died poorer than their fathers. There are several reasons for this. High taxation (and estate duty avoidance), combined with almost ceaseless inflation in the twentieth century, diminished the number of substantial estates in constant terms until the nineteen-eighties. Just as important, the typical career patterns of the matriculants, which saw most, including the sons of businessmen-fathers, become minor professionals, paid an often meagre and fully-taxed salary, worked against economic success. There were, of course, some notable exceptions, but in general, subsequent achievement among Oxbridge students was seldom reckoned in terms of economic success.

The picture found here is ironical and strangely contradictory: while Oxbridge products dominated significant sections of the political and Whitehall elite, as well as

[30] The constant valuations take the average of 1865 and 1885 as 100, as from the Rousseaux price index in B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 471–3.

the senior leaders of the judiciary, the Anglican Church and, perhaps, the City of London, most Oxbridge matriculants enjoyed careers lacking in real success of any kind, let alone elite status. Because a considerable proportion of the fathers of these matriculants were themselves eminent men, education at Oxbridge did not appear to increase the number of extremely successful careers among their offspring, although this is not inconsistent with the fact that those Oxbridge men who did reach the very top might themselves (like H. H. Asquith) be drawn from undistinguished social backgrounds. Oxbridge did not provide a 'royal road' to the top, although an Oxbridge education certainly denoted a universally observed marker of likely candidates for elevation to the very highest positions. After 1850, education at a major public school and Oxbridge in effect replaced aristocratic title and landed acreage, or close relationship with the old aristocracy, as the chief defining characteristic of the vastly larger middle and upper-middle classes which emerged from Britain's population explosion and from the commercial and industrial revolutions.[31] Nevertheless, such an education did not guarantee success, which was, as always, a product of talent, good luck and circumstances. There was not always room at the top, and the number of very senior places was – by definition – always smaller than the ranks of the less exalted.

Nor did an Oxbridge education hold the key to rising to the highest places in all elite groups, even among those that were clearly a part of the 'establishment', however defined. For instance, of the thirty-seven most significant senior British leaders in the world wars, fewer than a quarter attended Oxbridge, and Oxbridge graduates are notably infrequent among a wide range of elite position-holders, from leading industrialists to such professional groups as solicitors and doctors to – needless to say – the trade union and working-class elite (although Oxbridge graduates certainly held a disproportionately large share of the leadership of the Labour party, especially between about 1935 and 1985). Elite leadership in Britain never approached being a caste, and, even when the backgrounds of elite position-holders appeared most similar, there was always a wide range of exceptions.[32]

[31] On Oxbridge's and Britain's elites, see Scott; and such works as W. L. Guttsman, *The British Political Elite* (1963) and D. Boyd, *Elites and their Education* (Windsor, 1973).

[32] Rubinstein, 'Education and the social origins of British elites'. Because of space limitations, and the size of the samples, a number of important topics cannot be discussed here, such as the differential career patterns among matriculants at individual Oxbridge colleges. It may be that, significantly, Balliol men achieved greater success than graduates at other colleges, but this remains to be shown.

