Forging the Gentleman-Professional Class:

The Resistance, Adaptation, and Dominance of the Landed Elite in Industrial Britain, 1800-1868

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The first half of the nineteenth century wrought immense economic and social change in Great Britain. As the Industrial Revolution kicked off and increasing numbers of people moved to Britain's major cities, the government created thousands of new jobs to supervise city development and help the burgeoning populations now "enmeshed in the new industrial society."[1] Such jobs required technical and specialized knowledge, and only "highly competent men" could fill them.[2] Thus, a new class of men—wealthy professionals—emerged over the first half of the nineteenth century. Using their own abilities to rise through the ranks and accrue wealth, these competent men became the engineers, scientists, and managers who spurred on industrialism and social reform. Indeed, these professional men challenged the old socio-political order, in which the landed elite—that is, the aristocracy and the gentry—controlled the Parliament, the Civil Service, and the military through their system of patronage.

The professional class's criticism of privilege, and the resulting resistance from and adaption by the landed elite, becomes particularly evident when one looks at education reform. Starting as early as 1800 and culminating in the Public Schools Act of 1868, middle-class reformers scrutinized the elite public schools[3] and pressured them to reform the Classical curriculum that distinguished them as the leisured class. The landed elite resisted such reform over the decades, but by the 1860s they were left with no choice but to adapt, lest their influence fade in the shifting economic landscape. Instead of surrendering their power to the rising middle class, however, the landed elite refashioned meritocracy to work within their privileged system, even as they forged a new identity for themselves as a professional-gentlemen elite. By

[1] T.W. Bamford, *Rise of the Public Schools: A Study of Boys' Public Boarding Schools in England and Wales from 1837 to the Present Day*(London: Nelson, 1967), 249.

[2] Ibid., 19.

[3] When I mention the elite public schools, I am specifically referring to the seven public schools that were examined in the Clarendon Commission and were subject to the Public Schools Reform Act of 1868. These schools are Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Westminster, Winchester, Charterhouse, and Shrewsbury.

reworking social reform to their benefit, the upper classes thus overcame the imminent challenge to their power and continued to exert their socio-political dominance into the twentieth century.

The pressure for social reform began in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleon's meritocracy,[4] when many middle-class reformers "developed an itch for instant gentility" and began "to change their expectations and question the limits of horizon and the code of deference prescribed in the past."[5] By the early decades of the 1800s, this questioning turned towards the public schools in the form of hostile criticism. In particular, reformers focused on the schools' Classical curriculum, which created a distinctive upper-class culture that was, "with its nuances and overtones, impenetrable by the outsider."[6] Indeed, the public schools perpetuated the ideal of the leisured English gentlemen, whose power was "not dependent on knowledge, or ability, or democratic approval, but was buttressed by and kept in place by a restrictive educational system."[7] Knowledge of the Classics was impossible to come by except through expensive schooling; as such, the public schools' heavy emphasis on the Classics limited elite membership to those few families who could afford public-school tuition.

It thus comes as little surprise that the Classics became a rallying point for reformers. As early as 1802, reformers brought attention to public-school curriculum through published letters to school headmasters. At this early stage, arguments focused on the Classics' threat to religious morality rather than their uselessness to an industrial society. Indeed, in one exchange between

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[4] According to Linda Colley on p.159 in her book *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, most of Napoleon's officers and nobility "possessed a claim to land or ancient lineage, but had risen to prominence since the Revolution through their own exertions. In this sense, Napoleonic France could still be seen—and was seen by its British opponents—as a meritocracy."

[5] Linda Colley, "Dominance," in *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 159.

[6] Colin Shrosbree, *Public Schools and Private Education: The Clarendon Commission 1861-64 and the Public Schools Acts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 57.

[7] Ibid., 58.

Westminster's headmaster and reformers in 1802, reformer Dr. David Morrice called for "a total revision of the system of education,"[8] as he considered mythology to be "the parent of infidelity"[9] and the Classics to be filled with "pagan nonsense, obscenity, and absurdity," which "poison[ed]" the young's judgment.[10] He further demonized the Classics by suggesting that reading them could lead to revolution, for, he claimed, Revolutionary France based its constitution on the Classics and subsequently became a "scourge and terror to all its neighbours."[11] In the midst of these attacks, the headmaster of Westminster, Dr. William Vincent, stood by the Classics, claiming that he was "not authorized, even if he were willing, to substitute Prudentius for Virgil or Gregory of Nazienzen for Homer."[12] Indeed, he claimed that the Classics were *not* meant to teach paganism; rather, they were to be used as examples of world-class literature.

Such public letters continued to circulate as the middle-class gained power and wealth over the 1820s and '30s. Rather than focus on the religious argument, however, these new letters took a decidedly socio-economic approach and derided the Classics for their uselessness, especially when compared to Industrial Britain's new focus on science, mathematics, and the modern languages, which spurred economic growth. One such letter to Eton's headmaster in 1834 reveals this new way of criticizing the Classics. In the letter, a reformer rails against the

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[8] David Morrice, Dr., *An Attempted Reply to the Master of Westminster School, on the Subject of his Defence of Public Education, in Answer to the Lord Bishop of Meath, and the Reverend Dr. Rennell* (London: Knight & Compton, 1802), 7.

[9] Ibid., 8.

[10] Ibid., 15.

[11] Ibid., 10.

[12] John Chandos, *Boys Together: English Public Schools 1800-1864*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 35.

public schools' sole focus on the Greek and Latin texts, complaining that Eton's education is "insufficient for its purpose in every department, in religion, letters, and science" and that "it is notorious that ninety-nine out of one hundred [students] never write a bit of Latin after they have left school."[13] The headmaster of Eton's response is biting: "It is more notorious," he writes, "that a candidate for any scholarship or exhibition is *required* to give test of his proficiency in Greek and Latin, by composing in both languages; that in most colleges, (and I do not remember an exception) prizes are proposed in every term for composition in various metres."[14] Additionally, the headmaster further defends the elite schools' sole focus on the Classics by revealing his doubts that any large school could successfully incorporate a subject such as mathematics into its curriculum, as mathematics "require a maturity of intellect, and a power of reasoning to which the majority of boys are unequal."[15] Thus, even with mounting pressure from outsiders, the old public schools staunchly held on to their elitist Classical curriculum and the old power they associated with it.

The landed elite's resistance to outsiders extended beyond biting letters; it was inherent in the schools' populations as well, as the middle- and lower-classes began to have access to the money needed to attend the prestigious public schools. Indeed, although the public schools "prided themselves on their classlessness of social intercourse and indifference to rank,"[16] this social equality was "subject to certain qualifications, at Eton, and in varying degrees at the other public schools," for "its spirit did not extend beyond this fellowship to those who were, and were

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[13] A Parent, *Some Remarks on the Present Studies and Management of Eton School* (London: James Ridgway, 1834), 14, 20.

[14] Etonensis, *A Few Words in Reply to "Some Remarks Upon the Present System and Management of Eton School"* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1834), 13

[15] Ibid., 18.

[16] John Cannon, *Aristocratic Century: The Peerage of Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 74

described as, 'outsiders,' and most especially to 'outsiders' who aspired to become 'insiders.'"[17] For instance, Rugby boys whose fathers were button-makers were derided as "Buttons,"[18] while the sons of grocers at Charterhouse were "'beaten for [their fathers'] sake.'"[19] The old elite's exclusive behavior particularly manifests itself in one Old Westminster student's letter to a fellow Old Boy in 1829. In the letter, the Old Westminster writes that the great public schools had no place for the "petty shopkeeper," for he could not benefit from such an education.[20] The writer marks his point by reminding his friend of a pot-boy who was sent to Westminster by an aspiring publican, but only lasted three months before he left the school. While he was "neither bullied nor beaten, […] he was taught, by unequivocal lessons from those he wished to make his playmates, that he had been missorted."[21]

Such an incident reflects a larger trend in the public schools to protect the old elite's "identity from 'debasement' and the solidarity of its character from dissolution."[22] Outsiders did not belong, and unnaturally mixing the classes was akin to inviting all the destruction of the "rude horde."[23] Like the Goths, Huns, and Alans who once "pour[ed] down upon the fair fields of Italy," these new boys would destroy the British elite's civilization; they would "ravage, waste, and defile the treasures which they can neither enjoy nor appreciate."[24] Backing such

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[17] Chandos, *Boys Together: English Public*, 74-5.

[18] George A. Lawrence, *Guy Livingstone* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1857), 4.

[19] Chandos, *Boys Together: English Public*, 75.

[20] *A Very Short Letter from One Old Westminster to Another, Touching Some Matters Connected to Their School* (London: W. Clowes, 1829), 8.

[21] Ibid., 10.

[22] Chandos, *Boys Together: English Public*, 76.

[23] *A Very Short Letter*, 12.

[24] Ibid.

allegations was the ultimate fear of social upheaval. With increasing numbers of middle-class boys attending the public schools, the elite feared for their own place at the top of the social pyramid. If the middle- and lower classes became educated and successful, they could compete with the elite for professional jobs and ultimately prove that the upper class were not inherently better after all. Merit could supersede blood, and even more frightening still, the rising professional class could uproot the landed elite.

It became much harder for the elite to justify the Classical curriculum in the years directly preceding the Clarendon Commission of 1861. By the 1850s, middle-class reformers spearheaded the creation of the Civil Service Exams, which tested general knowledge and served to "open fresh avenues of employment to the professional class and to those outside it who had sufficient academic ability and determination to thrust their way in."[25] Such a reform was a "shattering blow to aristocratic privilege and to closed systems of patronage," as boys from all classes could take the exams and test into the government or military positions that suited their talents and skills.[26] Suddenly, Classical education was not enough anymore; if upper-class boys were to compete and maintain their influence as the elite class, they would have to study the sciences and modern languages to pass the examinations and make a living. With their nearly exclusive focus on the Classics, however, the elite public schools were ill-suited to the task of prepping their students, especially when compared to new public schools like Cheltenham, which emphasized both a general and a Classical education. The upper-classes would have to push for reform if they were to survive in the new meritocratic order. Otherwise, their sons "might find

[25] W. J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 86.

[26] Ibid., 87.

themselves debarred" from an "important area of national life" and "intellectual culture" due to their own "ignorance."[27]

While aristocratic "disquiet with the public schools was widespread" by the late 1850s, it was "rarely expressed in print—perhaps because the school most criticized, Eton, inspired the most loyalty from those most influential."[28] Despite the lack of public records, personal letters and writings reveal both the upper class's growing feelings of inadequacy when it came to understanding scientific knowledge and their subsequent wish for their children to "be better educated than they had been to engage the resources of the new world."[29] One letter from Lord Clarendon to the Duchess of Manchester in 1862 is a perfect example of this shifting viewpoint. Charged with interviewing the leading scientists of the day to determine the failings of the public schools in his role as president of the Clarendon Commission, Lord Clarendon wrote that "I had never felt more shy, as of course I did not want to expose my ignorance more than was necessary." He goes on to remark that it was "very interesting, when you consider the immense national importance of the education of the upper classes in these days of active and general competition" that the "stick-in-the-mud system of our great public schools […] places the upper classes in a state of inferiority to the middle and lower."[30] Lord Clarendon could not allow such a trend to continue, and although he was not sure how much help his efforts would be, he continued to push for reform in the elite public schools.

With the growing discontent among the landed elite, it is unsurprising that no one objected when the idea of the Clarendon Commission was brought up in 1861. The elite's

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[27] Shrosbree, *Public Schools and Private*, 65.

[28] Ibid., 45.

[29] Chandos, *Boys Together: English Public*, 321.

[30] Herbert Maxwell, Sir, *The Life and Letters of George William Frederick, Fourth Earl of Clarendon* (London: Arnold, 1913), 2:269-70.

allowance for education reform should not be mistaken for submission to the new meritocratic system, however. While the landed elite sat for the Civil Service Exams and supported the Commission, they did not abandon their patronage system. In fact, the landed elite continued to exert their influence to dominate the top government and military positions. For instance, the Cabinet still drew "largely from public-school men," who defended the old order.[31] As a result, many "fellow old boys" managed to get the top jobs of the Civil Service, and "posts in the old departments" continued to go "more by patronage and political favour than by merit."[32] Much of the same can be said about the military. While competitive entry "opened a much wider gateway to talent,"[33] the army was still an expensive occupation, one which many could not afford. In fact, the "'best' regiments were still guarded by considerations of wealth, social standing, and family connections" and "the cavalry's magnificence remained, on the whole, undimmed by brains."[34] Thus, the old elite used both the meritocratic and patronage systems to their own end: class dominance. By cooperating with education reforms and the Civil Service Exams, the old elite appeared to be playing by the new rules, but in reality they were still exercising their old patronage system to maintain their strategic positions in the government and the military.

Even when comparing the successes of the old elites and the new professionals, the former still possessed an "aristocratic edge" when it came to public success; indeed, the advantage of birth "preserved the upper hand of the aristocratic element within the new governing elite."[35] For instance, boys who went to the elite public school Harrow "outdistanced

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[31] Bamford, *Rise of the Public*, 249.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise*, 96.

[34] Ibid., 98.

[their professional Merchant Taylors' school counterparts] by leagues in winning virtually every sort of social and cultural distinction in later life"—this despite the fact that the Merchant Taylors' boys "stayed in public schools longer, outperformed [Harrow boys] at the universities, were much keener to enter the professions, or even that they lived longer and therefore had longer to succeed."[36] This disparity between the successes of Harrow and Merchant Taylors' boys proves that while the idea of merit had flourished in Industrial Britain, it could not strangle the old ideas of patronage and privilege entirely.

The landed elite's striking balance between the old patronage system and the new meritocratic one helped them reshape and revive their class's image. Gone was the image of the leisured yet ignorant gentleman, for the competent gentleman professional had come to take his place. The public schools were key to this transformation, as they were responsible for amalgamating the landed elite and middle-class professionals into a new, powerful ruling class. This was especially true after the Clarendon Commission and the resulting Public Schools Act of 1868, which enabled the public schools to more easily shed their old Classical curriculum and better control which "worthy" boys would receive the allotted scholarships to attend the schools.[37] In the halls of the public schools, the elite thus "adopted the dynamic, wealth-producing values of the professional and entrepreneurial classes," even as they absorbed worthy members of the lower-classes into their number, thereby "making the professions gentlemanly"

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[35] Edward A. Allen, "Public School Elites in Early-Victorian England: The Boys at Harrow and Merchant Taylors' Schools from 1825 to 1850," *Journal of British Studies* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 90, accessed July 23, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/175535.

[36] Allen, "Public School Elites in Early-Victorian," 90.

[37] In many of the public schools' early days, money was set aside for "foundation" boys, who were generally poor, local students who attended the school for free. On the recommendation of the Clarendon Commission, the schools were now able to eliminate "foundation" boys in favor of scholarships, which went to the admission of "poor" scholars," who were very often not actually "poor," but "rather the 'comparatively poor,' and even these were to be carefully selected." Shrosbree, *Public Schools and Private*, 9.

and "a fit calling for the heirs or near heirs of titles."[38] The old elite could now effectively work in the jobs that had once been beneath them, and even though they allowed lower-classes into their ranks, the end result was the creation of a "large, professional, and socially differentiated governing elite," which was "dominated as thoroughly by the old landed aristocracy as was the unreformed House of Commons."[39]

By reworking the new meritocratic system and adopting the better qualities of the rival professional class, the British landed elite were thus able to survive and flourish during the rapid socio-economic changes of the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, they were in a unique position to do so. Unlike the older aristocracies on the continent, the landed elite in Britain were "more intimately linked with other social classes," and as such, they were not as much an "outside" group that needed to be brought down as they were an ideal to which the lower classes aspired.[40] In fact, the only markers that truly separated the landed elite from the lower classes were their wealth and their Classical culture. As the money gap closed and their Classical culture did more harm than good, however, the elite were left with no choice but to adapt to the new meritocratic system or risk fading away. Using their age-old strategies to their advantage, the old elite thus elevated "worthy" members of the lower-classes—here, the rising professionals—and claimed them for their own. By doing so, the landed elite effectively allied themselves with their newly elevated fellows and ensured their continuing socio-political dominance for decades to come as the heads of the new elite class of professional gentlemen.

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[38] Ibid., 89

[39] Ibid.

[40] H.J. Habakkuk, "England's Nobility," in *Aristocratic Government and Society in Eighteenth-Century England: The Foundations of Stability*, ed. Daniel A. Baugh (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 110.

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