The Victorian Public School

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The Victorian age was the hey-day of the public school and the upsurge of interest in the period has focussed much attention on this venerable institution. The present volume consists of eleven papers originally presented to a conference at Leicester in 1973. They do not cover all aspects of the subject. We are spared, for example, any chapter on sex and the latter-day Victorian student, accustomed to such offerings, may feel himself cheated. On the other hand there is inevitably a degree of overlap between the different authors, and though this is sometimes tiresome, it does expose us to different points of view.

In his introduction, Brian Simon ranges over the various authorities on the schools of this period, noting that a leading nineteenth century writer, Howard Staunton, regarded the schools as nurturing the aristocracy, whilst a modern writer, David Newsome, saw them as an instrument of middle class advance. Simon notes too that in the later nineteenth century there were three types of public schools: the prestigious "Clarendon nine," new foundations like Marlborough and Cheltenham and old established local grammar schools which had thrust themselves upwards under the direction of vigorous headmasters. Professor Simon also draws attention to the change, which took place from 1860 onwards, as the number of clergymen on the teaching staff began to decline and as the evangelical influence gave way to more mundane concerns. He further remarks on the power and independence of the headmasters, the "very superior men," who at the end of the century succeeded through their Conference in dominating the secondary education section of the new Board of Education.

Perhaps the most fascinating chapter of the volume is that in which J. R. S. de Honey investigates the question of what exactly in the late nineteenth century constituted a public school. In 1897 there were 437 boys' schools in England and about 600 altogether in the British Isles which had some pupils up to 18 years of age. But among these were many humble institutions which were certainly not recognized, nor would they claim to be recognized, as public schools. By what criterion were schools so recognized? Academic results were certainly accepted as important, yet among the top scholarship-winning schools were such unglamorous day schools as Boston Grammar School, Newcastle High School and Carlisle Grammar School. Academic success therefore did not automatically confer public school status, and similarly membership of the Headmasters Conference was not an infallible criterion, for some very prestigious schools were outside. The author examines the interaction between schools in sporting competitions of one sort and another, and believes that the degree of recognition extended to a particular school in this way is a good indication of its status in the schools community. This analysis identifies 50 schools which had indisputable right to recognition as public schools and a further 12 with a good claim on the basis of their general acceptance by the others; another 40 schools formed an outer ring with some claims to recognition. The total number of schools with any claim to be regarded as public schools thus stood at 104, though a further 60 unjustifiably laid claim to this status. Of the 50 top schools Professor de Honey remarks that all of them were Anglican, most of them were situated in the south of England and they included in their number day schools like Merchant Taylors', Bradford Grammar School and St. Pauls'. Moreover while some of the 50 were highly exclusive, there were others which charged only moderate fees; therefore the schools as a class can not be regarded as the monopoly of the rich. Professor de Honey's analysis is most valuable though one may perhaps wonder whether school fixture lists may not sometimes reflect the realities of yesterday rather than the realities of today. School A may continue to play school B for old times' sake even though the status of one school is now much higher than that of the other.

Alice Percival contributes a very pleasant and informative paper on the careers of four Victorian headmasters — Percival of Rugby, an outstanding Liberal and Low Churchman who later became Bishop of Hereford, Reade and Sanderson of Oundle and Henry Platt of Wellingborough Grammar School who once laid a bet on a pupil and paid out the winnings when the horse won at 8 to 1. In a further useful contribution, H. J. Meadows and W. H. Brock discuss the question of why science was so slow in gaining acceptance in the public school curriculum. The subject had considerable prestige among the public by mid century and leading scientists urged its claim upon the schools. In the schools themselves such influential headmasters as J. M. Wilson, Henry Butler, George Ridding and Frederick Temple were sympathetic to the cause of science, and the recent progress made by modern languages and mathematics engendered hope for the future of science also in the schools. But while everyone agreed on the utilitarian value of science, it did

not meet the essential school master's requirement of character training; parents did not show much interest, and there was also the chronic difficulty of obtaining suitably qualified teachers of the subject. The newer Universities indeed did countenance science but it had comparatively little prestige at Oxford and Cambridge from which the schools normally recruited their staff. For these reasons progress, if any, was painfully slow.

Several authors touch on the cult of athleticism which developed in the later years of the century as the concept of manliness, "moved out of the chapel into the changing room." The cult brought with it a much greater degree of recognition, of organization of the pupils leisure hours, and T. W. Bamford in his essay on Arnold, remarks that the great man would not have approved of the change. J. A. Mangan contributes a paper on athleticism commenting very sensibly that the modern reaction against it is probably as exaggerated as the cult itself. He illustrates the phenomenon of athleticism by tracing its course at Marlborough which was founded in 1843. In the school's first years the boys enjoyed a good deal of unorganized leisure, but morale was nevertheless low when G. E. L. Cotton was appointed headmaster in 1852. Cotton felt it necessary to exercise more supervision over leisure time and therefore he elevated organized games to an important place in the school. He believed that physical fitness was valuable not only for itself but as a useful complement to intellectual activity and as character training. He appointed young masters whose prowess and enthusiasm won the respect of the boys. Cotton and his staff were successful in raising morale at Marlborough, but athleticism spread far and wide and reached proportions which Cotton never intended. For athleticism appealed to the natural "boy culture" and what our author calls the anti-intellectualism of the upper middle class. The lack of other extra-curricular activities was also a factor but more important still, the cult of fitness seemed relevant to future careers in the imperial service abroad, and moreover, philistinism in the schools seemed peculiarly appropriate in an imperialist age. In Mangan's opinion the decline of athleticism in the twentieth century was due to the rise of State schools and the sterner academic competition which public school pupils had to face in consequence. However Norman Vance, in a valuable essay entitled, "The Idea of Manliness," which overlaps several other contributions somewhat, suggests that the cult began to flag before the end of the century, eroded at both ends. On the one hand an "elegant lassitude" began to appear as a reaction against athleticism whereas on the other, the idea of manliness took on a more military aspect as the international situation deteriorated.

This military aspect is considered by Geoffrey Best in an essay "Militarism and the Public School" which may arouse some puzzlement because of its provocative title. Militarism is an ugly word and it stands for an ugly thing; it may be doubted whether the term can properly be applied to a nation which knew nothing of conscription. But the essay is of great interest as it discusses the role of the Cadet Corps in the schools, the growth of patriotic feeling and the relation which existed between certain schools and the army. Eton, Harrow, Cheltenhaim, Wellington, Charterhouse and Marlborough were the schools which provided most officers for the army, with old Etonians dominating the infantry regiments. However, the schools seem to have done little to prepare pupils for Sandhurst and many boys, like Winston Churchill, had to be coached at a "crammer" after leaving school in order to pass the entrance exam.

There are essays also on "Tom Brown's Schooldays" on school architecture and on the origins of football, the last of these suggesting that the formalization of two rival rugby and soccer codes was due mainly to the rivalry of Rugby and Eton. Altogether the volume is a good one, full of fascination for students of education and of Victorian social history alike.

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