

Tom Brown's New World: North American Versions of the English Public School.

The category "independent school" includes very many institutions of ancestry more modest and less curious than the Victorian public school. This is so in England itself where Thomas Arnold's Rugby is popularly perceived as the model independent school. In fact, in Arnold's time and afterwards, there were small private academies galore (the majority of extremely poor quality and low social esteem) and many proprietary institutions (both boarding and day schools) which were far removed in kind and quality from the seven Great Schools of England examined by the Clarendon Commission in the early 1860s.¹ All were equal, however, in one respect: their detachment from the growing "system" of increasingly state-financed and state-controlled primary and secondary education which, in England, culminated in the 1902 Education Act. It was the only point of equality. Power and prestige attached only to the so-called public schools; and it was on the models of Rugby, Eton, Winchester, Westminster and the others of the great Seven that dozens of new public schools were founded in the years after 1840.

Distinguishing between authentic public schools (ancient and modern) and mere imitators is a serious exercise which has occupied the attention of modern historians of education interested in the English governing class.² They agree that only proper public schools are properly described as nurseries of England's top people. The others (with the exception of a few remarkable independent day schools and old direct grant grammar schools) are socially insignificant relatives. There is little agreement when it comes to listing which schools qualify as "public". On one point, however, a consensus has emerged: membership in the Headmasters' Conference is far too inclusive and is no guarantee of genuine public school status.

Judging by two recent books on elite education in North America³ little thought has been given to any such analysis of Anglo-Saxon independent educational styles as they were exported to the colonies of the New World. Perhaps institutional social gradations, so evident in English secondary schooling, do not exist here, although this is hard to believe. Certainly Carolyn Gossage considers many schools which could never pass the most lax qualifying test as public schools even though they are members of the Canadian equivalent of the Headmasters' Conference. Leonard Baird confines his sample of *The Elite Schools* in the United States to forty-two establishments all of which seem to pass the tests of exclusiveness and excellence to which their English counterparts are being subjected (although some are day schools); but he does not indicate the reasons he chose these few from among the hundreds of independent schools in America. Which Canadian schools really do foster a privileged social group? What does "privilege" mean in this context? Which American schools are really for the elite? What makes them different from other independent schools? These questions remain.

Despite uncertainty about the common character of Mrs. Gossage's schools and ignorance of the criteria by which Dr. Baird selected his American schools, it is clear that both authors are mainly interested in the exported tradition of the Victorian public school. In their different ways they have written about Tom Brown's transatlantic descendents, male and female.

The public school fulfilled an important role in Victorian society. In a period of shifting political power Tom Brown's Rugby (and its sister schools and imitators) helped to preserve the landed ruling class, and afforded entry into that class to families whose industrial and commercial styles of life had kept them hitherto outside the circles of political power. The Victorian public school fostered responsibility, as well as respect for work, industry, and merit among England's traditional rulers; to the offspring of newly-enfranchised increasingly-powerful men of business it gave the manners of the aristocracy. The public school helped to moralize the gentry class (with the ethics of Evangelicalism and laissez-faire) as it also ground the children of capitalists into gentlemen. As England's ruling oligarchy grew to include all men of property, the public schools of England did much to give this newly-expanded ruling minority coherence and a sense of common standards and ideals, as well as shared accents, clubs and customs.

Thus Victorian public schools contributed to social stability by uniting members of classes which were commonly thought to be mutually antagonistic, moulding the young of aristocrats and businessmen into a powerful ruling group. Public schoolmen came to occupy most important positions in government (both in politics and the civil service), in the professions and (to a remarkable degree) even in industry and commerce. In A. J. Balfour's cabinet of 1902 (said to be "the apogee of the public-school dominance in British politics") "virtually the entire governing group were products of the system."⁴

Democracy came slowly to Britain in the twentieth century. The Franchise Act of 1918 established it in principle; but not until 1928 did women under thirty receive the vote, and plural voting existed until 1948. Furthermore, even though the class eligible to govern widened to include all, even though the state system of education was vastly strengthened, English deference and powerful Victorian tradition combined to preserve the public schools' role in public life to a remarkable degree. According to T. W. Bamford, in the parliaments of 1955-59 "about 20 per cent of Labour and 74 per cent of Conservative back-benchers graduated from the public schools. . . . Only 10 per cent of Conservative back-benchers came up through the state system."⁵ Lord Vaizey has recently pointed out that

Over two-fifths of the entry to the higher civil service in the 1960s came from public schools, and two-thirds of the entry to the Diplomatic Service. In 1967, three-quarters of the Directors of the Bank of England came from public schools, three-quarters of the bishops, four-fifths of the judges and QCs, 87% of the Conservative Cabinet of 1964 and two-fifths of the Labour Cabinet of 1965; two-thirds of the top doctors and three-quarters of the company directors of big companies come from public schools. This compares with about 3% of fourteen-year-olds at public schools, and 17% of undergraduates drawn from public schools.⁶

The point of all this is that English public schools performed a clear public function in pre-democratic English society, and it is the extraordinary continuation of this function in democratic Britain that makes the contemporary English public school such a rewarding subject of study.

There is no evidence whatever either in *A Question of Privilege* or in *The Elite Schools* that North American versions of the English public school (i.e. private boarding schools) ever performed any analogous public functions at all. The very few pages devoted by Mrs. Gossage to the place of private school graduates in Canadian society are confusing and uninformative.⁷ Dr. Baird makes no effort to set his schools into the wider social scene; there is little discussion (none at all of the quantitative sort one would expect from an author so devoted to questionnaires and surveys) of the actual influence of their graduates in government, busi-

ness and the professions. Readers will not expect these sorts of schools to have anything like the same consequence in egalitarian New World societies as they continue to have in tradition-bound, class-ridden Britain; but it is astonishing that neither author thought it worthwhile either to confirm or to deny these expectations.

The reason public school experience interests English readers is precisely because most of the country's leaders for over a century have lived through that experience during their adolescence. Public school graduates formed a "network" (to use the word adopted by J. R. de S. Honey) based on shared pronunciation, slang, manners and accomplishments rooted in their educational experience. These characteristics cemented the ruling class "facilitating various forms of interaction and patronage, notably in respect of the entree to jobs, to clubs, to commissions in the army, and even to marriage."⁸ Some enjoyed public school life; others did not. Appreciated or not, all recognized that the boarding school of their teens was a world all its own, an encompassing environment isolated from the world beyond, governed by its own code, ruled by its headmaster, held together by team spirit, school songs and house loyalties, and remembered by Old Boys throughout their lives.

Many famous men wrote about their schooldays, among them Alex Waugh, Robert Graves and Rudyard Kipling;⁹ a wider public learned of the quality of school life from popular school novels and from the *Boys' Own Paper*. Indeed, the popular idea of a school was shaped not by the humble tradition of Victorian elementary schools, but by the image of elite boarding establishments, even though they were attended by a few unrepresentative Englishmen.¹⁰ Reflections on public school life almost always give considerable attention to the life-style of the pupils, the significance of games and sports, and (to a lesser extent) to the academic curriculum and the structure of the school as a community.

Certainly there are some things in the ethical idealism of the public schools that are undoubtedly attractive: "standing by one's friends, playing the game, not letting the side down, recognizing truth, and . . . never giving in."¹¹ On the other hand there is much that seems unpleasant; fagging, bullying, and snobbery have little to commend them. Widespread homosexuality seems hardly avoidable in circumstances of teenage single-sex boarding schools, and there is every indication that it was a frequent (if hidden and repressed) concomitant of public school life. By the end of their schooldays, English boys had usually gained a capacity to cope with others living at close quarters, to be effective members of teams, and to live under conditions far more stringent and deprived than were normally necessary for the children of those who could pay public school fees. The British journalist Peregrine Worsthorne thinks this relative deprivation was the most valuable feature of the public school experience:

Those first terms at public school were the only time one learnt what life is like for the weak and vulnerable; what it is like to suffer permanent fear and hunger; what it is like to experience savage injustice without any real chance of restitution; what it is like to be dependent on the arbitrary whims, fancies and prejudices of the powerful; what it is like to be subjected to humiliation and persecution by the forces of law and order, or at least with their connivance.¹²

The feeling of community, the sense of identity, and the consciousness of isolation which were elements in the quality of life in an English public school are evident too in many North American private boarding schools. Dr. Baird found that

the location of the schools suggests that most are isolated or at least not surrounded by the problems of cities or suburbs. . . . This isolation almost certainly adds to students' feelings that they

are completely subject to the rules and procedures of the schools with few options for life outside the schools.¹³

In American schools isolation seems to be a subject of pupil discontent and one cause of the almost total immersion of teachers' lives in the routines of the institution. As in the English model, so in the North American school, the headmaster is the ruler, his nearly-absolute power delegated to him by the trustees or governors.

Dr. Baird does afford a reasonably full (if rather impersonal) view of attitudes and pupil experience in the community of the North American private schools. He lists values which the schools themselves try to inculcate in their pupils ("courage, independence, . . . commitment, honor, courtesy, service to family, country, and world")¹⁴ although his surveys of student opinion cast doubt on the effectiveness of ethical indoctrination. There is no evidence of Flashman-type bullying in Baird's rather sterile discussion of child life in the schools, no sketches of the relationships between young and older boys, of the dynamics of team sports, or homosexuality as a behaviour problem in the single-sex school. This last point is remarkable in view of the emphasis upon it in memoirs and studies of English boarding school life. Certainly Dr. Baird does consider sex-in-general to be a problem. In one of his many tables based on surveys of opinion in the forty-two schools, he lists "thirteen potential sources of stress" to pupils, one of which is "relations with the opposite sex."¹⁵ English school literature, on the other hand, suggests that masturbation and sexual relationships with the same sex have been considered the main problems, no doubt much exacerbated by the absence of the opposite sex.¹⁶ On other points current American boys' private school practices are not unlike the British model: the life-style of the boys is kept relatively Spartan despite lavish surroundings; extracurricular activities are thought very important on both sides of the Atlantic. On the other hand concern for racial minorities is a major preoccupation of the American schools which is not mentioned at all in studies of their English counterparts.¹⁷ Less expected, perhaps, is the lack of interest expressed by American pupils in political careers, the traditional ambition of so many English public schoolboys.

Students of the English public school tradition would be interested in the ways the academic and athletic traditions of the great schools of England have fared overseas. Latin and Greek (especially Latin) dominated teaching on the Victorian public schools to a remarkable degree; in Arnold's Rugby, of 28 3/4 hours allocated to academic classes in 1834, 17 3/4 were devoted to classical languages and literature (excluding classical history, which was also studied).¹⁸ During the century and a half since Arnold's headmastership the emphasis on Latin and Greek has become less overwhelming. But it has not been lost, and in a recent account of Winchester in the 1950s, Classics was described as "the one subject that really mattered."¹⁹ Originally the mark of a gentleman and an educated amateur, public school classical education was the basis for a common culture of the governing elite. As that elite has been thinned by the waters of democracy, so the common culture has disappeared. Yet the classical tradition of education remains in the English public schools.

What of the classics in the Rugbys of the New World? We are told nothing of it either in Gossage or Baird. In at least one major boys' boarding school in Canada no member of the regular staff now teaches either of the classical languages. This was not always the case, and there can be no doubt that many Canadian schools, founded by Englishmen (and Englishwomen) in the public school and Oxbridge tradition, began as classical academies. Why did this tradition peter out here? Did

it ever really take hold? Certainly readers of both Dr. Baird's and Mrs. Gossage's books would have gained had the authors devoted rather more effort to analyzing the nature of the curricula in the schools they surveyed. Baird, in particular, makes a major point of the high academic expectations and achievements of pupils and their parents in the American elite schools. He lists the "standard academic" subjects of concentration (English, mathematics, science and languages), and he recommends broadening this curriculum.²⁰ What is missing is a consideration of the roots of the existing pattern and its relationship to changes in American culture since the schools were founded.

The dominant fact of English public school life outside the classroom (at least since late Victorian days) has been team sport. Athleticism, indeed, became a passion and a preoccupation as the public schools became nurseries and testing-grounds of what David Newsome has called "manliness".²¹ In becoming an effective member of a rugby or cricket team the late Victorian public schoolboy learned the art of teamwork so necessary to gain and govern a great empire. Faith in the moral value of public school sport has continued. In 1977, Gordon Ross wrote that

the whole fabric of sporting teaching at the public schools is based almost entirely on the team game as a character builder; it breeds unselfishness, all pulling together in the common cause, an absolute dedication in a determination not to let your teammates down, a trinity of virtues which, if carried through life, make for the better man.²²

No one who has observed, even casually, daily life at Canadian private schools can fail to notice the attention and time given to organized games, and it is evident from Dr. Baird's work that sports form an important element in the routine of the schools he considered. Yet neither in *A Question of Privilege* nor in *The Elite Schools* is the role of games and sports considered seriously as a factor in the private schools of North America. In the tradition from which most of those schools sprung team sports and classical learning were thought to inspire the young with the personal qualities deemed necessary for a governing class. It is hard to believe that some measure of this faith did not survive the voyage to the New World.

Why do parents send their children to such schools as Eton or Marlborough, Deerfield or Groton, Trinity College School or Ridley?

Squire Brown dispatched Tom to Arnold's Rugby to improve his son's character. He was little interested in learning. Thomas Hughes put the squire's thoughts this way:

I don't care a straw for Greek particles, or the digamma; no more does his mother. What is he sent to school for? Well, partly because he wanted so to go. If he'll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman, and a gentleman, and a Christian, that's all I want.²³

Parental decision to send a child to a public boarding school has frequently been taken for non-academic reasons, although not always those of Squire Brown. Undoubtedly character development has been an important motive. Another has been the desire to maintain or enhance the family's social standing. Others have included dissatisfaction with local schooling (by no means always academic), a desire to escape the stresses and strains of continuous parenting, and a belief that isolation in a single-sex community would prevent sexual adventure. Sometimes children were sent to English public schools because their parents lived outside Britain, serving the queen in the outposts of empire (rather as the sons and daughters of Canadian career diplomats today are frequently deposited in boarding schools at home).

The most curious reason Victorians had for incarcerating their sons in boarding schools, however, was the conviction that the hardships of public school life turned boys into men. Certainly those hardships were real. Not only were beating and caning accepted punishments, but the diet was poor, the schools were often dreadfully cold (according to Dr. Honey "during a cold winter in the mid-90s the ink in one Radley classroom remained freezing until mid-day, four hours after the lighting of the fires and gas-lights"), and they were occasionally infested with rats.²⁴ Tim Brooke-Taylor, who was a boy at Winchester in 1954, discovered there were no bathtubs, showers or soap, that ice formed on the washbasins beside the boys' beds, and that the lavatories had no doors.²⁵ If such physical miseries were insufficient to induce "manliness", there was always the discipline of the prefects or the sufferings that schoolboys inflict on each other.²⁶ Many well-off English parents have thought that these sorts of things develop human character in a desirable way, toughening their boys to enable them to endure the hardships of empire-building, giving their privileged sons a healthy touch of deprivation.

Nothing in either Mrs. Gossage's or Dr. Baird's books suggests that character-building of this type is a factor in the minds of North American parents who decide to send their children to boarding schools. Had Carolyn Gossage been able to enquire into the workings of the schools run by the Company of the Cross in Manitoba, Alberta and Ontario (independent schools which in many ways vary radically from the public school tradition) she might have found more than a trace of the notion that deprivation contributes positively to character, and that deliberately-contrived hardship makes boys into men.

On Mrs. Gosage's evidence about more conventional institutions, character-building by other means does play a large part in attracting parents to patronize the private schools of Canada. Snobbery also has an appeal to Canadian parents, and the small classes, allegedly superior instruction, and concentration on university entrance each plays a part in filling the schools.²⁷ In the United States, according to Leonard Baird, academic advantage constitutes the chief attraction of the elite schools to parents who obviously think very differently than Squire Brown (and perhaps many contemporary English parents as well). American parents, although they hope the schools will foster "moral growth", nevertheless are concerned primarily to avail their children of the "smaller classes, better teachers, better training in diligence and study habits, more academically challenging curriculum, and greater likelihood of admission to the college of their choice" thought to be available to pupils at independent schools.²⁸ This, at least, is the result of studies quoted by Dr. Baird, although a student of the public school tradition might well be sceptical. Surely it is a weakness of "objective" studies such as *The Elite Schools* (and many of the works upon which it draws) that they fail to consider latent motives which respondents may well wish to hide (or may not recognize), such, for example, as snobbery and a desire to climb the social ladder.

Whatever the mix of reasons, it is a fact that both in their homeland and in English-speaking North America, schools of the English public school type are flourishing in the 1970s. Dissatisfied with the state systems for whatever cause, parents who are affluent or self-denying, or whose offspring are bright enough to tap the schools' scholarship funds compete to place their children in the best independent schools. The fees and boarding costs are enormous and rising steadily, as the expenses of maintaining large school properties and well-qualified staffs mount. Clearly independent schools in all three nations face financial problems. Schools with little or no endowment income, less-than-rich alumni, or trustees

without the means or willingness to mount major fund-raising efforts, have a difficult time. It is striking, however, that so many schools surmount these financial problems, not only meeting current costs year by year, but steadily adding to their physical facilities. For example, Lakefield College School, a small boarding school in rural central Ontario with a good academic standing, fees well over \$6,000 a year, and large numbers of applicants for entry, has just launched a fund-raising campaign for \$1,600,000. This is not being done to augment income, but to develop the school's physical plant. Members of Lakefield's Board of Governors have already themselves contributed and pledged \$350,000.²⁹

Cost do not seem to be the main problem facing the schools. Both Carolyn Gossage and Leonard Baird consider lack of responsiveness to desirable changes in curriculum and school organization to be more threatening to the future of the schools than insolvency. Boards and alumni tend to exert pressure against change, so that even if an innovating headmaster is appointed he may find himself frustrated.³⁰ Dr. Baird offers positive suggestions for academic changes in American independent schools, changes in the direction of liberalization of the curriculum.³¹ Impressed by the results of surveys showing that American pupils feel neglected in school decision-making, he believes they should be consulted and their views on many matters seriously considered.³² Curiously, he makes no mention at all in his book of the traditional prefect system, by which Thomas Arnold and countless headmasters since his time have included senior pupils as their allies in managing the life of the schools.

Contemporary English public schools have one problem that is foreign to the North American scene: the threat of abolition or absorption by the state. This threat is a product of the advanced welfare state, which questions the legitimacy of privilege itself. In the words of T. W. Bamford:

If the best medical service and treatment irrespective of cost should be at the disposal of any member of the community according to need, merely because he is a member of that community, should not the same principle hold for education? Certainly the existence of independent schools denies it, and people are correspondingly uneasy. . . . It would. . . be intolerable for a patient under the National Health Service to be denied treatment because of lack of wealth, and similarly the ordinary child should have the education best suited for him and not the one dictated by some irrelevant factor connected with his parents.³³

It seems curious that successive Labour governments should not have carried this logic into legislation. They have, after all, removed the class factor in the state system, abolishing direct grant schools and merging grammar and secondary modern schools into comprehensives. All this, however, seems to have strengthened rather than threatened the public school establishment, for many good direct grant grammar schools have opted for independence rather than deteriorate academically into comprehensive institutions. Far from declining, public schools grow more numerous; and if their products no longer actually dominate the worlds of politics, business and the professions, they still exercise influence in a democratic society far greater than their numbers seem to justify.

It is unlikely that elite private schools in egalitarian, multicultural North America have the same social importance public schools had in Victorian England or even in modern democratic Britain. Most of the schools considered by Mrs. Gossage and Dr. Baird are relatively small remote branches of the historic Victorian trunk. Nevertheless, many of their supporters have been well-placed in the North American societies, and their graduates have been influential both in public and private life. It would be thoroughly worthwhile to consider these institutions in their historical development and in their present social context.

Alas, neither Carolyn Gossage nor Leonard Baird has performed this service. *A Question of Privilege* is hardly more than a catalogue of Canadian private schools; it lacks critical analysis entirely and contains no serious attempt to explain the development of Canadian private education in its social context. In contrast, *The Elite Schools* is a genuine work of scholarship. It is a study of contemporary life in forty-two American schools, based on the results of questionnaires distributed to pupils, teachers and administrators, supplemented by written comments and interviews. This method has resulted in a book which has a good deal of interest; but it does not place the schools in historical or social context. This context is essential in determining the significance of private school education in North America. Thus Dr. Baird's book, for all its considerable value, is far from a definitive study of privileged schooling in the United States. There is still plenty of room for serious research about the development and quality of Tom Brown's New World.

Notes

¹ The seven schools were: Eton, Winchester, Westminster, Charterhouse, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury. The Commission also investigated St. Paul's and Merchant Taylor's schools, two London day schools. Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, 1864, vols XX & XXI.

² See, T. W. Bamford, *Rise of the Public Schools* (London, 1967) and J. R. de S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: The Development of the Victorian Public School* (London, 1977).

³ Carolyn Gossage, *A Question of Privilege: Canada's Independent Schools* (Toronto, 1977) and Leonard L. Baird, *The Elite Schools: A Profile of Prestigious Independent Schools* (Lexington and Toronto, 1977).

⁴ Paul Johnson, "The Education of an Establishment" in *The World of the Public School* (London, 1977), p. 25.

⁵ Bamford, *Rise of the Public Schools*, p. 321.

⁶ Lord Vaizey, "Facts, Theories and Emotions" in *The World of the Public School*, p. 190.

⁷ Gossage, pp. 11-14.

⁸ J. R. de S. Honey, "Tom Brown's Universe: The Nature and Limits of the Victorian Public School Community" in *The Victorian Public School: Studies in the Development of an Educational Institution*, ed. Brian Simon and Ian Bradley (Dublin, 1975), p. 21.

⁹ See, Alex Waugh, *The Loom of Youth*, Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* and Rudyard Kipling, *Stalky and Company*.

¹⁰ Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe*, p. xiii.

¹¹ George Macdonald Fraser, "Many Little Chaps" in *The World of the Public School*, p. 123.

¹² Peregrine Worsthorne, "Boy Made Man" in *The World of the Public School*, p. 95.

¹³ Baird, p. 7

¹⁴ Baird, p. 88

¹⁵ Baird, p. 108.

¹⁶ Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe*, p. 167ff.

¹⁷ Baird, p. 36ff.

¹⁸ T. W. Bamford, *Thomas Arnold on Education* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 22.

¹⁹ Tim Brooke-Taylor, "Manners Makyth Man" in *The World of the Public School*, p. 167.

²⁰ Baird, pp. 2 and 136.

²¹ See, David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal* (London, 1961).

- ²² Gordon Ross, "Breathless Hush in the Close" in *The World of the Public School*, p. 156.
- ²³ Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (London: Macmillan, 1958), p. 74.
- ²⁴ Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe*, pp. 213-15.
- ²⁵ Tim Brooke-Taylor, "Manners Makyth Man", in *The World of the Public School*, 165.
- ²⁶ Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe*, p. 216.
- ²⁷ Gossage, pp. 4-5, 10.
- ²⁸ Baird, p. 123.
- ²⁹ Letter to old boys and parents from John F. Stephenson, Canvasser, Centennial Restoration Fund, July 5, 1978.
- ³⁰ Gossage, p. 278.
- ³¹ Baird, pp. 143-46.
- ³² Baird, p. 135ff.
- ³³ Bamford, *Rise of the Public Schools*, p. 328.