Studies in Social History

The Army in Victorian Society

G. Harries-Jenkins

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G. HARRIES-JENKINS

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To Ina, Sîona, Morag and Elaine

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Gwyn Harries-Jenkins

1

The Impact of Defeat

In the space of a few months between December 1899 and February 1900, the last chapter in the history of the Victorian army was written. To a shocked and incredulous British public, accustomed to reading about the colonial triumphs of their heroes, Roberts, Wolseley and Kitchener, the defeats of 'Black Week' and Vaal Krantz were disasters as great as any experienced by the British Army. There was little to applaud in the news from South Africa. The main British army of 47,000 men under the command of General Sir Redvers Buller, a red-faced Devon squire, had stumbled from crisis to crisis. In December 1899 Lord Methuen, sent with a strengthened division to relieve Kimberley, had been repulsed at Magersfontein. General Gatacre, who had been sent with a brigade to clear the Boers from the north of Cape Colony, had been defeated at Stormberg. The commander himself, trying to relieve Ladysmith, had been so badly beaten at Colenso on the Tugela River that he had ordered the beleaguered garrison to surrender.

To a very large extent the British public over-reacted to these tactical reverses. By European standards, the number of casualties suffered by the army in South Africa were small. Even at Spion Kop in January 1900 when Buller was again badly mauled no more than 1,700 men were lost. What magnified the scale of these disasters was not, however, the number of casualties, but the realization that they had been inflicted by a part-time army of Boer farmers. From the beginning, the public had been led to believe that the war would be another colonial triumph. Before the outbreak of hostilities, both press and politicians had looked forward to another easy campaign. Writing to his mother on the eve of mobilization, George Wyndham, the Under-Secretary of State for War and a former Guards officer, assured her that the army was more

efficient than at any time since Waterloo.(1) In 'Blackwood's Magazine', a writer concluded his appraisal of the coming war with the assured statement that 'no greater mistake can be made then to suppose that the conquest of the Transvaal Boers, left to themselves, is a task which would severely test the British army, or which would involve an expenditure which need in the least degree alarm the taxpayer'.(2) Nor had the military élite been any less optimistic. Buller, in a final interview with Lord Lansdowne before he left to take command of the British troops in Natal, had confidently concluded that he would begin his advance about two days before Christmas, and that it would probably take him 'one month to pass through the Orange Free State, and after that fourteen days to get to Pretoria'.(3) Mafeking shattered this feeling of smug complacency. The defeats of Magersfontein, Stormberg and Colenso ended a wave of jingoistic optimism. They brought home to the British public, with dramatic effect, the realization that the Victorian military system had been found terribly wanting. For most of the century, from the Battle of Waterloo onwards, the system, as an important instrument of imperial expansion, had removed the burden of world power from the British people as a whole. It had allowed them the opportunity to promote a 'Pax Britannica'. It had pioneered the growth of British institutions overseas, and had ensured stable conditions for the expansion of trade. Now in 1900, the reputation of that imperial army had been shattered by a small force of 'slinking' Boers who, unlike the Sudanese, 'did not stand up to a fair fight'.(4) A 'mob of good marksmen'(5) had somehow put an end to a complete way of military life. It was all too evident that the Victorian army, as a fighting force, would be irrelevant in any future major campaign against the well-equipped mass army of a European power.

What, then, was this Victorian military establishment? What was the relationship between it and the parent society within which it functioned? Why had it persisted for so long in an era of striking technological developments? Few immediate answers to these questions emerged from the inevitable enquiry which, by tradition, followed every major British military reverse. The Royal Commissioners, under the chairmanship of the Earl of Elgin, analysed the shortcomings of the British performance in detail. Their Report, published in four large volumes, acknowledged that the whole military system as it stood in 1899 had been tested by the war in South Africa.(6) The Report's comments were pungent and scathing. It revealed causes of failure which were remarkably similar

to those published after the Crimean débâcle — the want of organization, the lack of professionally trained officers, the inferior qualities of soldiers who were the sweepings of cities, the mindless rigidity of a rank and file whose tactical training had been based on the rules of the eighteenth-century drill book. It indicted, in its inquiry into the administrative defects and their causes as revealed by the war, almost every aspect of the army and the military system. Yet the Report, as comprehensive as it was, could only touch briefly on the more fundamental causes of this military weakness. Like a regimental history or campaign study, the Elgin Commission was primarily concerned with the analysis of a single event or series of events within a specific time scale, and it did not pretend to provide answers to the wider questions which arose.

Some indication of these causes of weakness could be seen in a comparison of the Victorian army with the mass armies of the European powers. On the Continent, armed forces were already becoming a world in themselves, characterized by a separate profession, closed organization, their own value-system and norms, a special technology and their own system of law. In short, these were the armies of an industrialized society, armies which apparently were able to exploit the advantages of mobility, fire power and concentration which a technical age had conferred upon them. In contrast, the Queen's army was a heterogeneous collection of regiments and corps, each of which sought to maintain its own identity. They were linked not by any universally accepted code of military values, but by the civilian interests of their members. A common acceptance of the standards and norms of the English ruling class from which the bulk of the officers were recruited, formed the basis of their attitudes towards such critical factors as the development of professionalism, the effects of technological innovation and the growth of the civilian bureaucracy. Socially the army, like early Victorian society, was held together by the bonds of deference. In common with the lower orders who had habitually deferred to their 'betters' in an earlier and more rural society, soldiers accorded officers the respect due to rank and title. The military code of obedience was supplemented by a complex pattern of social relationships which mirrored those of the parent society in an earlier period. In turn, junior officers normally deferred to their more seniors, not because of the latter's professional expertise but because the considerable self-confidence and authoritarian style of general officers reflected their upper-class

assumption of an inborn right and duty to lead others.

This claim to hereditary authority was seldom questioned within the enclosed and exclusive world of the officers' mess. Where it was challenged was in the increasingly competitive world of the expanding middle classes. This was a group who were aware of their potential power to a greater degree than in the past. Their discontent with some aspects of aristocratic society, in combination with their concern for working-class poverty, heightened their middle-class self-consciousness. Consistently throughout the century, they opposed aristocratic idleness and privilege with a fervour which reflected their concern with the puritan values of hard work and dedicated commitment.(7) Now, at the end of the Victorian period, it appeared as though the army were the last bastion of neo-feudalism. Time and time again, these critics discovered ample evidence of the way in which the army was apparently an outmoded relic of an earlier period that had disappeared in the wider society. The courage, recklessness and physical toughness of many officers, for example, reflected qualities which in the Regency period had been cultivated for their own sake and which in the early Victorian period had been relished as the eccentricities of the foxhunting squire. But as the nineteenth century ended, qualities such as these appeared to compare very unfavourably as the hallmarks of military efficiency, with the cool detached professionalism of the Prussian officer corps.

The nature of the middle-class attitudes, attitudes which were a significant commentary on the relationship between the Victorian army and society, were moulded by the opportunity given to the public at large to serve in the armed forces. In the absence of conscription or the mass army, few members of society had any experience of military service in the regular forces. Even after 1870 when the employment of troops in an expanding empire led Cardwell, the Secretary of State for War, to introduce an ambitious programme of military reform, the regular army establishment was only 135,000 officers and men. In contrast the Prussian field army alone in the 1870 war comprised 462,300 infantry and 56,000 cavalry, while the total effective strength of the military was well over a million men. Shortly before the war in South Africa, the numerical strength of the British Army compared very unfavourably with that of her Continental neighbours. In the German Empire, with a total population of 61,479,901, the peace strength of the army, exclusive of troops employed in the African protectorate, was a cadre of 591,507 officers and men. In France, a population of

80 million supported an army of 573,743, whereas the British Empire with a total population of nearly 400 million produced a regular army of no more than 248,076 troops. Although this military participation ratio was slightly improved in Britain by the opportunity given to civilians to serve with the militia and other auxiliary forces, it was nevertheless axiomatic that only a very small percentage of the total male population had any experience of army life. Some of the effects of this were inevitable. The resulting cultural and physical remoteness of the Victorian army was an important characteristic of its relationship with the parent society. To many Victorians who lacked first-hand knowledge of military life, their army was an institution whose values differed from those of the population at large. Since it was an organization which few of them joined, they mistrusted its apparently privileged position during a century of change. In particular, they were very critical of the life-style of the officers where the daily routine within a regiment seemed to reflect the social life of the country's upper classes at an earlier period of history. The early socialization of these officers, their education at a small number of select boarding schools and their subsequent military training — or the lack of it — apparently created a privileged group who seemed to be out of touch with, and out of sympathy with, the technological and social changes which had affected the remainder of society. In contrast with the Prussian officer corps which was aristocratic but professional, British officers, with a few notable exceptions, seemed to be aristocratic and amateur.

To the British public as a whole, the army was thus an unknown institution. Most of the soldiers were in any event serving overseas, from the Shetlands in latitude 60 degrees north to the Falklands in latitude 55 degrees south. Their presence at home was not particularly noticeable. And when they were seen in Britain on parades or on guard-mounting ceremonies or on manoeuvres, they were objects of distant admiration. Their presence was welcome, provided it was at a distance. Closer contact was less acceptable. There were occasions, perhaps all too frequent, when civilian society totally rejected the military — as when a soldier was prevented from riding in an omnibus, or when three sergeants were expelled from a box in Her Majesty's Theatre in the Haymarket because they were wearing the uniform of the British Army.(8)

This ignorance of army life did not inhibit criticism nor did it necessarily invalidate the attempts made by the public at large to understand why their army had

failed in South Africa. It did, however, produce a number of paradoxical situations. Consistently the public, though willing to share in the victories of its army, were strangely indifferent to the condition of the military. 'Over and over again when attempting to improve Army conditions we have had to speak to a practically empty House, empty Press gallery, and unsympathetic public.'(9) More than two centuries of national hostility to any organized military force, a hostility engendered by Cromwell's dictatorial role, had produced a public mistrust of a standing army in peacetime. This hostility was, as Fortescue stresses, truly 'national', shared by all sorts and conditions of men. It vented itself in the neglect and maltreatment of the army by the government of the day, and in the hatred and scorn of the people at large.(10) For most of the nineteenth century, the middle class refused to join the officer corps, whilst the industrial and rural worker looked upon a son who joined the army as a disgrace to the family name; yet both groups resented the privileges of the military, and each, in its own way, deplored the apparent exclusiveness of army life. When its army was defeated, the public reacted violently. When the army was successful, the public basked in the reflected glory, pouring adulation — and financial rewards - on its victorious generals; a paradox which led a foreign observer of the British scene to comment, 'How this blind glorification and worship of the Army continues to coexist with the contemptuous dislike felt towards the members of it must remain a problem in the national psychology'.(11)

Equally paradoxical was the effect of British conservatism. Whilst it was very evident that the army had been found wanting, the wish to cling fiercely to old institutions meant that the public at large strenuously set its face against whatever seemed to endanger sanctified traditions. This conservatism was still more loth to part with a tradition if it were a famous one. The British Army under Wellington had gained victory upon victory in the Peninsular War. It had routed Napoleon at Waterloo. Under leaders such as Campbell and Havelock it had subjugated an immense Empire. It had waged more or less successful war in every corner of the globe. Why then, change in time of peace the finest army in the world? What might be suitable for a Continental army was not necessarily suitable for the British Army which, it was argued, was in a class of its own. The army had stood by itself in the past and would continue to do so in the future. Professionalism and a dedicated commitment to military life, like universal conscription, smacked too readily of a militaristic spirit which was totally foreign

to the British way of life. Yet it was the lack of professionalism and the absence of this dedication to the military career which in time of defeat were two of the most pungent criticisms levied against the Victorian army.

British conservatism, pride in past successes and a sense of natural independence were some of the subjective reasons which justified the paradoxical retention of an outmoded military system in an era of technological and political change. But these reasons could be supplemented by the practical realization that the geographical insularity of Britain favoured the development and growth of the Royal Navy. To the supporters of the 'blue water school' and to other critics of the army, it appeared as though there was nothing carried out by the military in the United Kingdom, which could not be more efficiently — and more cheaply — provided by auxiliary and reserve forces. In this context, the creation of county and borough police forces, although it relieved the army of much irksome duty, also removed one of the basic reasons for the retention of a standing army in peacetime. If the duty of preserving law and order could be transferred from the army to a quasi-military force, then it could also be argued that the task of providing defenders in the event of invasion by a foreign power could similarly be transferred to a force of civilians in uniform. Yet underlying these immediate subjective and objective reasons for the evolution of the Victorian army in a particular form, was the more fundamental question of the place of the army in nineteenth-century England. In criticisms which were made of the military, too much attention was paid to details of superficial and peripheral importance, and too little to the realities of the relationship between the army and society. Conclusions which were reached were often based on inadequate evidence, and in many ways it looked as though the relationship of the military establishment to society had to be based on one of two polar extremes. On the one hand, it seemed as though the army and society were two completely separate institutions. Britain, it appeared, was a non-militarist nation. There was no indication of the preponderance of the military in the state. Instead, 'civilianism' was the order of the day, a characteristic which implied a rejection of military values, militancy and the adulation of the military ethos. This further encouraged the public in their belief that, in the absence of any extensive control by the military over social life, both military objectives and organization were wholly or partly subordinated to a civilian way of life. A lack of public interest and involvement in military or para-military activities confirmed the distinc-

tion between 'militarism' with its apparent addiction to drill and ceremonial or its worship of useless trappings, and 'civilianism' with its preference for dynamic commercial and industrial development. Military activities were thus believed to be on the periphery of societal development, and their characteristic features were seen to be indicators of group attitudes and behaviour, rather than the reflection of the ethos of society as a whole.(12)

This conclusion encouraged a section of the British public in their belief that the military was a functional body which existed quite separately from all other institutions in society. Their attitudes were confirmed in contemporary studies of the military. The majority of these were critical in their approach, emphasizing the neo-feudal characteristics of the military organization, but this particular analysis of the military was not limited to the works of reformers such as Trevelyan or De Fonblanque.(13) Studies which related the position of the military to that of other institutions in society tended to concentrate on circumstances and occasions when, as in the Crimea, there were differences of opinion between the political and military élites. Much of what was written examined differences as to the control and direction of war operations with a view to restating the institutional arrangements which were in existence. When more general aspects of military life were considered, as when 'The Times' and 'Punch' in the 1850s deplored at length instances of 'military jocularity', the generally-reached conclusion was that these examples of hazing and bullying were symptomatic of an institution which was different from the remainder of society. The identification of the military, in emotive language, with such attributes as authoritarianism, inhumanity, coercion and persistent social conservatism made it difficult to reach any other conclusion. Even the mass of campaign literature which appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century endorsed the feeling, through glorifying selected aspects of military life, that the army was different from the remainder of society.(14) Nor did the writings of Victorian officers contradict this conclusion, for the majority of these army apologists sought to convince the public that there was something almost mystical about life within the military organization and that the participants were not like ordinary men. The features of military life were apparently completely different from those of society at large and for the 'man on the Clapham omnibus' this portrayal was particularly prevalent in the popular culture and mass media accounts of Victorian service life. The common characteristic of these diverse publications

was thus the emphasis that was placed on those qualities of the Victorian military which suggested that the army could be distinguished from comparable civilian structures. Indeed, descriptions of the army tended to perceive this as a total institution in which clearly defined barriers had been erected between the organization and the remainder of society. This perception then encouraged the belief that interaction between members of the military establishment and the world at large was extremely limited, a conclusion which drew attention again to the differences which apparently existed between the military and the parent society.

Since most contemporary Victorian literature on the subject of the army sought to draw attention to the way in which it differed from other institutions in society, it is easy to forget that this was only one point of view. In contrast with these writings, the work of other theorists emphasized the similarities between the army and the remainder of society. In some ways Gaetano Mosca's classic work 'Elemanti di Scienza Politica', which appeared in 1895, brought out most clearly the extent to which Victorian soldiers were men of their time. Here, officers as part of a ruling class were seen to be closely linked to other members of that class through ties of kinship, shared educational experiences, a common lifestyle and a mutual wish to ensure the preservation of the status quo. 'Army officers', declared Mosca, 'retain close ties with the minority which by birth, culture and wealth stand at the top of the social pyramid.'(15) This point of view thus stressed that the army was an integral part of society. It emphasized that armed forces were subject to the same internal and external pressures as any other large-scale organization within society. Military social forces and army professionalism were closely related to those of other occupational groups, for the army in common with these groups, was forced to adapt to increasingly important technological developments within society.(16) The members of the military could not be differentiated from other members of the wider social structure. The Victorian officer was a representative of that broader society. His ideological attitudes and political commitments were the same as those of his civilian counterpart. Like them, he was a Conservative or a Liberal, or less frequently, a Radical; not the member of an exclusively military political party. He belonged to the same political clubs — the Carlton or the Reform — or in common with other members of the ruling class was a member of prestigious social clubs. There were institutional parallels in the social organization of military

and civilian structures. Although in the twentieth century much of the military social organization appears to be out-moded and a relic of the Victorian period in which it was formalized, no such criticism can be generally made of the army in the nineteenth century. Some aspects of this structure did indeed tend to persist in the military after they had disappeared in civil society. At the beginning of the Victorian period in particular, it was evident that the characteristics of a Regency England with its emphasis on 'Honour' had lingered on in the military establishment. This was evidenced, for example, by the eagerness with which officers were prepared to take part in a duel to wipe out an alleged insult long after duelling had disappeared from the scene in civil society. In 1840 the Earl of Cardigan was tried before the House of Lords for fighting a duel with Captain Harvey Tuckett formerly of the Earl's regiment, the 11th Hussars. Three years later Lieutenant-Colonel David Fawcett of the 55th Foot was killed in a duel by his brother-in-law, Lieutenant Alexander Munro of the Royal Horse Guards.(17) But increasingly as the century progressed, this legacy of an earlier age disappeared, until the military became an organization and a profession whose members were integrated individuals within the total societal context. In short, when looking at the Victorian army, we are from this point of view also looking at the broader picture of Victorian society.

Ultimately, attitudes towards the relationship of the Victorian military and the parent society fluctuated between these two extremes. To many Victorians, their army was an institution whose values differed from those of the larger society. It was an organization which few of them joined. They reacted unfavourably to its apparent privileged position during a century of social and technological change. The physical and cultural remoteness of the military encouraged a commonly held belief that the army was, in some way, an aberration within British society. It was, at best, a necessary evil whose existence in peacetime could only be justified in terms of its imperial functions. These were functions which were superfluous within the immediate territorial vicinity of the parent society, and as the century progressed any apparent justification for the retention of the army within the United Kingdom as a means of preserving law and order lost its validity.

Conversely, other Victorians saw the armed forces as a reflection of dominant social values. It was an institution whose existence ensured the preservation and continuation of basic norms and standards. The latent

function of the army was to provide credibility for the State as an independent and autonomous society. It was the existence of this army which propped up the structure of society, for the role of the military was essentially the support of an established social order. And, in carrying out this task, the Victorian army mirrored in its attitudes, its rituals and its way of life, the culture of an upper-class élite who dominated that society.

The question of the effect of the relationship between the army and society on the effectiveness of the Victorian military was not one which could be easily answered. Evidence could be produced to justify a number of points of view. Many of the reached conclusions were value judgments, their expression illustrating the moral or political commitment of the debater. Diverse viewpoints frequently generated considerable discussion as the harshest critics of the Victorian army variously claimed that the military was either too isolated from, or too enmeshed with, civil society. The significant point was that the general feelings which were developed in discussions of the relationship of the military and society reflected deeply held internalized values. These, themselves, inhibited rational and objective assessment, but there were other factors which also affected the evaluation of the relationship between the army and Victorian society, and any analysis of this relationship has to take these into account. Some of these are particularly important. They not only explain further why the performance of the Victorian army was so poor, but they also reflect accurately the dominant social values of Victorian society. Ultimately it is the nature of these values and the way in which changes in the parent society were not necessarily paralleled in the army, which does much to explain the position of the military in nineteenth-century England. Yet these values did not originate in a vacuum, and to look more critically at the Victorian army it is also necessary to consider further the values and attitudes of society as a whole.

2

Officer Recruitment

One of the areas which brings out very clearly the complexities of the relationship between society and the Victorian army is that of officer recruitment. This was a problem area which affected very considerably the position of the army in three dimensions — as a profession, as an organization and as a political force. Professionally, the question which arose was whether a system of recruitment which allegedly produced a self-perpetuating clique would coincidentally hinder the development of professionalism, or whether the latter would only be ensured if recruitment were 'open', that is, based on criteria which emphasized the need for individual merit and ability. As an organization, the army was faced with the problem of developing a viable relationship not only between the members of the officer corps and their subordinates, but also between the military and political élites. In both instances, the crucial question was whether the association between 'officer' and 'gentleman' was so vital to the development of this effective relationship that it precluded the widening of the base of recruitment to include candidates from the 'lower orders'. In terms of its political attitudes, the Victorian army was similarly faced with problems which were derived from the adoption of any policy governing officer recruitment. On the one hand, it could be argued that a policy based on achievement produced a politically sterile military force, an argument which has been succinctly summed up by a modern commentator:(1)

> It implies that there is nothing in the professional soldier's social background which would endanger internal democracy. If the officer corps were a representative cross-section, they would hardly harbour intentions to upset the political balance. They could not be accused of imperial ambitions beyond those

sanctioned by the popularly elected legislators.
On the other hand, an argument similar to that advanced by Mosca in 'The Ruling Class' suggested that the recruitment of the officer corps from a limited area which coincidentally provided recruits for the political élite ensured that the interpenetration of these élites reduced the probability of inter-group conflict.

The military was not alone in facing these problems. Similar difficulties arose, for example, when attempts were made to lay down policies governing recruitment into the Home Civil Service or the Indian Civil Service, and to a considerable extent the situation in the army was paralleled by that prevailing in Victorian society as a whole. This was particularly noticeable in the way in which solutions which were put forward both for the military and for other institutions in the parent society were affected by attitudes towards the opposing concepts of open competition and patronage. Supporters of either system could advance convincing arguments in favour of the adoption or retention of their point of view. Open competition, it was argued, ensured by its policy of recruiting candidates on the basis of their academic ability that corruption, lack of incentive, and ascriptive bias were swept away.(2) Professionally, it would create an occupation based on achievement. Structurally, it would develop a meritocracy. Politically, it would limit the power of an entrenched ruling class. These were important considerations in the context of the changes which were taking place in Victorian society as a concomitant of technological advancement, and the arguments which were advanced by 'Reformers' such as Trevelyan and Macaulay were very persuasive. But there was another side to the picture. Patronage, it was argued, had brought into the public service at an early age men of ability such as Pitt. Their nomination to high office had furthered their careers and had enabled them to assume command when young. How otherwise, it was contended, would Wellington as a forty-year-old Lieutenant-General in 1808, last on the list of promotions, have been appointed over the heads of his seniors to command in the Peninsula? Patronage, moreover, had created group loyalty and encouraged a feeling of cohesiveness. Politically, therefore, it had ensured the recruitment and promotion of those who had an interest in the preservation of the system. Structurally, a system of patronage had discouraged deviancy. Professionally, it had brought into organizations the amateur whose attitudes and actions were not motivated by considerations of career or personal advancement.

In many ways the difference between these points of view was a difference of emphasis. In neither case did the supporters of one system or the other adopt an extreme stance. Open competition was not equated with open recruitment. Barriers were still raised against candidates from the major part of society. Patronage was controlled both by convention and by more formal rules, so that the system was not entirely open to large-scale abuse. When there was evidence of deviation from these rules, political and public reaction was most marked. The outstanding example in the nineteenth century was the revelation that from 1804 to 1806 there had existed more or less openly a traffic in commissions in which Mary Ann Clarke the mistress of the Duke of York, then Commander-in-Chief, had played the major role. For over two years, she used influence with the Duke to obtain army commissions and promotions for her clients whom she charged fees of between 200 and 1100 guineas. In 1809, six months after Mrs Clarke had separated from the Duke, Colonel Wardle, MP for Okehampton, moved in the House of Commons that an inquiry be made into the behaviour of the Commander-in-Chief with respect to promotions, the disposal of commissions, and the raising of new levies, and, after a brief debate, the Government agreed that the inquiry should take place. The inquiry terminated on the 23 February after several witnesses, including Mrs Clarke, had given evidence before a Committee of the House of Commons. While a subsequent six-day debate in the House exonerated the Duke, public opinion led the Duke to tender his resignation of the chief command of the army, a resignation which George III was pleased to accept. The difference of emphasis which characterized the more fundamental arguments about open competition and patronage was that while supporters of the former paid particular attention to the impact of the system on the development of professionalism, supporters of patronage tended to emphasize the political advantages associated with their choice of system.

This difference of emphasis was brought out clearly in the conflicting attitudes which were adopted toward the composition of the officer corps in the Victorian army. For supporters of a system of patronage, it was assumed that a gentleman, however imprecisely or crudely defined, had a definite social role to play within society. As Burn points out,(3)

> The country had to have its gentlemen to make and . . . administer its laws, to officer its armed forces, to conduct its diplomacy, to fill the episcopal bench and to do a score of other things. Although a particular member of the class might be sluggish, timid,

corrupt or illiterate, gentlemen as a whole were credited with enough public spirit, probity, courage and education to make them the essential servants of the Crown.

Once this premise was accepted, then from it followed the belief that the individual officer would carry out his duties in his own way, according to the believed standards of an English gentleman, without worrying about external evaluation of his military professionalism. This seemed to be confirmed in a number of instances. Kinglake summed up a popular feeling when in commenting upon Lord Raglan's conduct at the Battle of Alma in making a personal reconnaissance into the Russian lines, he wrote, 'The horseman who rode his hunter across the valley of the Alma and momentarily give it its head, was not an ideal personage but a man of flesh and blood, with many very English failings.'(4) In these and similar comments, it is apparent that for many commentators, it was far preferable for the officer to be a gentleman, notwithstanding his many failings, than for him to be a cad whose professionalism would be matched by his mercenary attitudes. Thus Wolseley, one of the few truly 'professional' generals to emerge in the Victorian period, was said by Lady Geraldine Somerset to be 'No gentleman', whereas her kinsman, Lord Raglan, was described as 'an honourable man and gallant to a fault'.(5) Civilian assessment of officers' performances continually tended to emphasize the merit of subjective concepts of 'honour', 'bravery' and 'temperament', all of which drew attention to qualities of character which were believed to be those of a gentleman, rather than stress the need for officers to possess positive military skills. The gesture of General Gough on the second day at Ferozeskah during the Sikh War of 1845, in riding out in a white coat to draw the enemy's fire away from his soldiers, epitomized the concept of gentlemanly chivalry.(6) It illustrated the courage and temperament which, with his racy Irish brogue, endeared Gough to his men, but it also raised questions about the wisdom of a commander-in-chief exposing himself to such risk. Yet Gough's courage was seen to be beyond approach. It was the continuation of an attitude which had led Marlborough to ride slowly up and down the line at Blenheim to hearten his men to be passive under fire. It was a foretaste of Raglan's behaviour at Alma. But it was rarely asked whether these qualities of character were those which were demanded from officers, particularly senior officers, in the complex military of a technological age.

At times, this reluctance to criticize the professional capabilities of army officers was so marked, that to the

modern-day student of the Victorian military establishment it appears as though expected behavioural attitudes were derived from social group membership to the complete exclusion of occupational considerations. Certainly this is a conclusion which can be drawn from a statement made by the Adjutant-General, Sir John MacDonald, in 1840:(7)

> It is the proud characteristic of the British Army that its officers are gentlemen by education, manners and habits; that some are men of the first families in the country, and some of large property, but the rules and regulations of the service require strictly that they should conduct themselves as ought gentlemen in every situation in which they may be placed.

To a large section of Victorian society, this preference for the recruitment as officers of gentlemen who were unconcerned by external evaluation of their professionalism could be readily rationalized. The existence of a narrowly-based socio-economic pattern of recruitment into the army could be justified on the grounds that the average Englishman would not accept as an officer anyone who was not his social superior, a thesis which specifically precluded considering the professional ability of the military officer. This was clearly brought out in a letter from Sidney Herbert to Mr Raikes Currie on 25 September 1857:(8)

> In despotic countries, the strong military feeling induces military obedience . . . here . . . military obedience would be impossible, were it not that the soldier comes from the class that is accustomed to respect and obey the class from which the officer comes.

Sidney Herbert's subsequent comment in the House of Commons in 1860 further developed this point and it clearly summarized the attitude of those people who defended a system of patronage on the grounds that the army needed gentlemen in the officer corps:(9)

> I am one of those old fashioned persons who believe that gentlemen officers are a great advantage. In this country, which is not a military nation, I am not ready to give up anything which tends to secure to our officers a ready and willing obedience.

This argument that discipline appeared to depend for its effectiveness on the believed superiority of the ruling class, also seemed to be confirmed by the preferences of the ordinary soldier. 'I know from experience', wrote Rifleman Harris, 'that in our army the men like best to be officered by gentlemen, men whose education has rendered them more kind in manners than your coarse officer, sprung from obscure origins, and whose style is brutal and over-

bearing.'(10) This was an attractive argument since it glossed over the self-interest which led these supporters of patronage to seek the preservation of the system. Additionally, its persuasiveness could be reinforced not only by reference to the inescapable evidence of the way in which this army, officered by gentlemen, had expanded an Empire throughout four continents, but also by recalling the warning given by the Duke of Wellington in 1828:

> The description of gentlemen of whom the officers of the Army were composed made, from their education, manners and habits the best officers in the world, and to compose the officers of a lower class would cause the Army to deteriorate.

Irrespective of the validity of this assumption that patronage brought into the army men of distinction who were committed to the preservation of certain normative standards, this attitude toward the pattern of recruitment was important for a number of reasons. It suggested, inter alia, that the military preferred to emphasize the importance of neo-feudal concepts such as bravery and honour rather than ideas of ability and merit which were more applicable to an organization in a period of considerable technological development. It implied that organizational norms — obedience, discipline, certainty — were more important than professional elements which emphasized the significance of training, education and devotion to study. In addition it stressed the very important point that the military officer, like his counterpart in other sections of the public service, was a gentleman whose choice of a career was motivated by his wish to serve his country for honour rather than for personal reward. All of these were suggestions which because of their emphasis on high-flown moral virtues appeared to negate those criticisms of the military which saw it simply as a class based élite in which ascription rather than achievement was the foundation of success.

In contrast, the supporters of competition argued from the premise that a restricted pattern of entry into the military produced a concomitant lack of professionalism. As the 'Quarterly Review' argued in 1848:

> It is reasonable to assume that officers coming chiefly from the higher and middle walks of life, have received in their youth the ordinary education of gentlemen. But in what walk of civil life can people get into positions of importance on the mere assumption that, being respectably born, they must have been duly educated?

The individual who approached his occupation with attitudes of an amateur gentleman, did not, it was argued, have any

very strong incentive to take his profession seriously. He was, it appeared, a typical member of an officer corps who in common with his eighteenth-century counterparts in France and England, did not have a military career in the way in which people in other occupations devoted their whole life to the pursuit of a professional activity.(11) Officers, according to their own interpretation of the military image, performed a service which had been the traditional function of the ruling class, 'that of the warrior who protects civil society'. This service however did not constitute a full-time occupation. It was part of a whole range of social activities embracing the management of estates, participation in national and local administration, family business and other élitist obligations which bore no direct relation to military activities. To carry out these non-military responsibilities, officers interrupted their service with frequent leaves, expecting both in peace- and war-time to return at regular intervals to civilian life. 'The real defect of the system of purchase', commented the 'Saturday Review', 'consists in its tendency to encumber the army with amateurs and to relax the ties which bind the officer to his profession.'(12)

It was however a criticism which was not directed at the military alone. The Administrative Reform Association, under the chairmanship of Samuel Morley (1809-86), equally attacked the Civil Service, arguing in its 'Official Paper No. 1' in May 1855 that 'the whole system of Government Office is such as in any private business would lead to inevitable ruin'. The conclusion that patronage encouraged the entry into the British public service of amateurs whose attitudes toward their professional responsibilities left much to be desired was an important comment on this traditional method of recruitment. But in attacking systems of patronage both in the military and in the parent society, critics were also quick to point out that there was no guarantee that the gentleman brought to his selected occupation those altruistic qualities of character which could be accepted as a valid alternative to professionalism. Matthew Higgins (1810-68), writing as 'Jacob Omnium', argued in 'A Letter on Administrative Reform' that the 'Upper Ten Thousand' had 'hitherto monopolized every post of honour, trust and emolument under the Crown, from the highest to the lowest. They have taken what they wanted for themselves; they have distributed what they did not want among their relations, connections and dependents'. A similar criticism could be made of the army where there was ample evidence of corruption, of veniality and of an absence of high moral standards, which suggested that the consequences of

adopting a system of patronage were too high a price for society to pay. At the beginning of the Victorian period in particular, the 'flâneur' in the officers' mess was not necessarily Thomas Arnold's Christian gentleman whose attitudes and behaviour were governed by his high moral sense and his devotion to manly virtues. The legacy of the Regency buck, the dandy, the man of spirit who could break with his whip all the windows of the High Street — fanning the daylights as he called it — was not yet dead. In many regiments, the assured unquestioning snobbery of the rich dominated the officers' mess. This was a world in which a Colonel of the Guards could give Storr and Mortimer, the Regent Street goldsmiths, £25 a quarter to furnish him with a new set of studs every week during the season.(13) Wealth and a title, not the charismatic qualities of leadership subsequently ascribed to a gentleman, could give officers such as James Brudenell, 7th Earl of Cardigan, almost unlimited power, so that after he had been removed from the command of the 15th Hussars, he was allowed to purchase the lieutenant-colonelcy of the 11th Light Dragoons (later Hussars) and turn it into a socially exclusive club.

In this situation, critics of the military could continually refer to evidence which suggested that the commissioning of these wealthy socialites did not bring into the regiments men of distinction. Duelling, bullying, hazing, drunkenness, gambling and gluttony were some of the military vices to which critics of the early Victorian army readily drew the attention of the public. But the military situation was particularly complex, for it created special problems and produced specific reactions. Despite the criticisms which could be made of these officers, it was nevertheless argued that the patronage system at least brought into positions of military importance, men who served the State loyally because it was the guardian of their own privileges and possessions. There was therefore, it appeared, a continuing need to find men who could not only, by virtue of their education and ability, adopt a more professional attitude but who also possessed those qualities of a gentleman which guaranteed that they would wish to preserve the status quo. 'The problem of army reformers', said 'The Times', 'was to provide a body of officers who will not cease to be gentlemen.'(14) The alternative, it was feared, was an 'imperium in imperio', a military force which, separated by impassable barriers from the remainder of society, transferred its allegiance from the Head of State to its own immediate heads.(15) Yet in trying to ensure a passive apolitical military by encouraging the recruitment

of gentlemen, further difficulties arose. This assumption ensured, if it were adopted, that the military remained a closed avenue of social mobility, an area within which there was no place for 'The middle class ... a class between the clergy and the legal and medical professions and the higher merchants on the one side, and the work people . . . the great middle class who carry on all our great industrial and marine operations'.(16)

Yet all the arguments which were advanced either for or against patronage and competition were based on subjective assumptions which could not be evaluated with any degree of objectivity. If there was no evidence to prove that the amateur gentleman was the only person fit to be an officer, equally there was no means of guaranteeing that the widening of the basis of entry into the military would bring into the establishment a successful group of bourgeois whose ability was axiomatic. This was an area of considerable uncertainty. Even the most avid supporters of reform in the public service, men who were prepared to endorse Trevelyan's contention that it was necessary to 'improve the spirit and character of the public service' in order that 'the present period will be distinguished above all others in this country for practical executive improvements',(17) could not agree on the criteria of 'ability'. In particular they doubted whether evidence of academic ability would ipso facto produce the type of individual needed in the public service. If there were doubts about the effects of open competition in this field of recruitment, doubts which prompted James Wilson, the Member of Parliament for Westbury and son of a Quaker business man, to suggest that the open competition which Gladstone and Trevelyan wanted, 'would be productive of an enormous amount of mischief',(18) how much greater was the uncertainty in the area of military recruitment. Here, the arguments put forward by reformers such as Graham, who stressed the need for entrants to the public service to have 'moral worth and personal merits', or the Radical Sir Benjamin Hawes who urged the importance of 'commonsense', or Sir George Lewis, Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1855, who considered that 'discretion and trustworthiness' were all-important, were of consistent importance.(19) All of these were attributes of character which seemed to suggest (if the integrity of the officer corps were to be preserved) the continuing need for some form of patronage within the Victorian military establishment. Moreover, while the force of the opposition to the existing military system was exacerbated by the belief that it deprived the middle class of a relatively easy means of acquiring a coveted social standing, there was no means of finding out

whether a wider basis of recruitment would ensure that a particular status was afforded to these new entrants. As Thackeray in his vitriolic account of the social problems faced by Major Ponto of the Royal Marines and his son Cornet Wellesley Ponto of the 120th Hussars pointed out, there were considerable difficulties which these newcomers to the landed interest encountered.(20) In short, this was a complex problem which was bound up with the niceties of Victorian social attitudes and existence of a hierarchically-constituted society, and no ready-made solutions were forthcoming.

But was entry into the military so completely restricted to members of a particular socio-economic group? More importantly, did a limited entry, if it existed, produce a low level of military professionalism? Or did the military position, even after the reforms of 1870 which formally abolished patronage, reflect a more general malaise in society as a whole?

The initial problem which arises in considering these questions is that the years of the Victorian military establishment not only covered a relatively lengthy period in the history of the British army, but also embraced an era of considerable social and technical change. The England of 1900 was different in a large number of respects from the England of a hundred years earlier. Indeed, it can be argued that there were considerable changes within the time-span of a decade. Burn, in analysing the Victorian period half way through the century, stressed that the England of 1852-67 was not the same as that of 1842 or 1872. Many of the old landmarks remained, but persistent and insidious change had altered the landscape in considerable detail.(21) Rostow in his identification of the five stages of economic growth in the life of industrial societies,(22) produces a typology which shows how during the Victorian period the shift of the economy, with its attendant social changes, from the basic industries sector to consumer goods and services, had a considerable effect on British society. Little survived unchanged. What did survive in the military establishment was not an entirely unchanging pattern of life. The field of recruitment did not remain static. Indeed, rigidity would have produced a military caste, completely divorced from the remainder of society. Instead, the army adjusted to changes in a social structure whose components altered in character and prospered or declined in importance, according to the pressures of industrialization. Nevertheless, a constant factor, irrespective of changes in the social order, was the interpenetration of the army and the landed interest, 'that great judicial

fabric, that great building up of our law and manners which is in fact, the ancient polity of our realm'.(23) This was a link of the greatest importance, for notwithstanding the criticisms which could be made of this landed interest, for as long as the possession of land was the symbol of social status and the ownership of a family seat was the sign of financial standing, the English landed gentry retained their dominant place in a wide variety of activities. In national or local politics, in the Church and in the civil bureaucracy, both in London and the counties, this landed interest formed a ruling class which made the major decisions for the remainder of society. In possession of the symbols and sinews of power, this group, despite their lack of agreement over many issues, formed a reasonably homogeneous whole exercising both influence and authority over the 'lower orders'. The identification of the military with this landed interest thus integrated the former with the wielders of power. The officer corps was not isolated from the ruling class. Drawn from that class, it had no need to use the ultimate source of physical power which it controlled, to advance its own corporate self-interest. No sectional interest existed to encourage the military to think of itself as having an identity which was different from that of the landed interest. Their motives and attitudes were identical. The officer thought of himself as a part of the landed interest fulfilling his obligations of public service within the military establishment, in the same way in which a brother or other relative served in the Church or in Parliament.

At the same time the landed interest was not a closed group. It was a constantly changing fluid structure, the composition of which altered as some of the old families sank into landless oblivion and newcomers moved into the group from outside. Equally, as the membership of the landed interest changed to meet the pressure of new wealth,(24) so did the pattern of recruitment into the military alter. Relatively easy access into the landed interest thus produced patterns of recruitment, and variations in the socio-economic background of military aspirants, which were often overlooked by critics of the Victorian military establishment. While the connection between the old established landed interest and the military establishment could be fairly readily traced, the relationship of the officer corps to newcomers into this ruling group was less easily noted. In itself, this difference was not important. What was of significance, however, was the way in which changes in the structure of the landed interest and, by extension, changes in recruit-

ment into the officer corps, prevented the military from becoming an exclusive caste. It was this fluidity which partly accounted for the difference in the attitudes of the German Junkers and the British officer corps, since a continuing extension of the area of recruitment from which officers of the Victorian military were selected hindered the development of rigid isolated attitudes. Many of these 'newcomers', moreover, were able to make a significant contribution to military and political life. The 3rd Baron Gifford (1849-1911), for example, enjoyed a distinguished military and public career. Educated at Harrow, he joined the army in 1869 and was a lieutenant in the 83rd Regiment in 1870. After transferring to the 24th Regiment, he served on Wolseley's staff in the Ashanti War of 1874-5 where he won the Victoria Cross. Following Wolseley to the Zulu War of 1879-80, he later retired in 1882 as a major in the Middlesex Regiment (57th Regiment). Although he had succeeded to the title in 1872, Lord Gifford did not remain long at his seat in Old Park, Chichester, for from 1880-3 he was Colonial Secretary for Western Australia and the Senior Member of the Legislative Council, before becoming Colonial Secretary of Gibraltar.

On first examination, this is not atypical. This was a family with a tradition of public service. Lady Gifford, the daughter of General John Street, formerly of the 57th Foot and a veteran of the 1842 China War, herself served in the Army Nursing Service in the South African War of 1900-2. The 2nd Lord Gifford had served in the army for fifteen years after his succession to the title. The family, moreover, had intermarried with the landed interest. The 3rd Baron's mother was the Hon. Frederica Charlotte, daughter of the 1st Lord Fitzhardinge, formerly MP for Cheltenham, who owned Berkley Castle and 20,274 acres in Gloucester with a gross annual value of £33,717. His maternal grandmother was Charlotte, daughter of the 4th Duke of Richmond and Gordon who from his seat at Goodwood controlled 286,411 acres in Scotland and Sussex.

It was the 1st Lord Gifford who provided evidence for the assertion that entry into the landed interest was not impossible. The son of a grocer and linen-draper of Exeter, Robert Gifford was created Baron Gifford of St Leonards in Devon in 1824, on his appointment in close succession as Lord Chief Justice of the Common Pleas and Master of the Rolls. This example confirms the presumption that recruitment into the army was not limited to members of the 'old landed families', and, indeed, members of these 'new' families often enjoyed a career of a

type which was rarely open to individuals in the older landed interest whose life-style tended to be prescribed for them. In the Gifford family, for example, the 3rd Baron's brother, Hon. Maurice (1859-1910) had experienced a remarkable para-military career. Educated at HMS Worcester, Greenhithe, he started life as an officer in the Merchant Navy but after six years he became, in 1882 during the Egyptian Campaign, 'Galloper for Mr G. Lagden, Special Correspondent Daily Telegraph'. After this, his wanderings took him to Canada where he was a Scout for General Middleton in Riel's Rebellion of 1885, and to South Africa where he was a Scout in Salisbury's column during the 1893 Matabele Campaign. Three years later he raised the 'Gifford Horse' during the Matabele Rebellion, and although a serious wound led to the amputation of his arm, this did not prevent his coming back to England in 1897 to command the Rhodesian Horse in the Queen's Jubilee Procession. The outbreak of war in South Africa saw him back on active service in the Kimberley Mounted Corps, a locally raised irregular unit.

There were innumerable cases where new entrants into the landed interest, for a variety of reasons, encouraged members of their family to enter the armed forces. In most instances these new men, who set out to become members of the landed interest, were very quick to appreciate that their integration into county society depended on their adoption of the life-style of their conservative neighbours, and of the institutions of this society, military life was one of the easiest in which to participate. So Albert Brassey (b. 1844) of Heythrop House, Chipping Norton, the fourth son of the railway contractor Thomas Brassey, followed his education at Eton and University College, Oxford with a period of service in the 14th Hussars, before he returned to his 4,275 acre estate. John Hubbard, whose position in the commercial interest as a Russian merchant and a Governor of the Bank of England, was recognized by his elevation to the peerage as Lord Addington during Lord Salisbury's second administration, similarly established himself as a part of the landed interest. In 1873, before he was created a peer, he owned 2,576 acres in the Home Counties with a gross annual value of £4,887. His son Egerton, 2nd Baron Addington (1842-1915) followed him into the family business as a partner in John Hubbard & Co., but his grandson and heir to the title, Hon. J.G. Hubbard (b. 1883), served as a junior officer in the Buckinghamshire battalion of the Oxford Light Infantry. These examples are not unique, and, indeed, a characteristic of the military establishment during this period was the extent to which the army was