

Studies in Social History

English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century

F.M.L. Thompson



STUDIES IN SOCIAL HISTORY

ENGLISH LANDED SOCIETY IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

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F. M. L. THOMPSON

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ENGLISH LANDED
SOCIETY

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

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Preface

THE theme of the decline of aristocratic power has often been treated in the political histories of the nineteenth century, and is indeed inescapable. Almost as often the influence of the landed interest has been prematurely dismissed, in eagerness to write nineteenth-century history in terms of the growth of middle-class power, the democratization of institutions, and the increasing importance of radical and working-class movements. While not seeking to re-tell the political history of the period, this book may contribute towards a more just appreciation of the relative importance of the different major social groups in the life of the country. It deals in the main with the economic history of the landed interest, and with its role as a social group. It includes much agrarian and some industrial history as seen from the landowners' point of view, although it is not intended to provide a history of agriculture, still less one of industry or the economy as a whole. It should not be taken as a definitive or exhaustive history of the landed interest: the vast riches of the private archives of landed families are increasingly being made available to historians, and are only just beginning to be tapped. In the present early stage of such research this book is, like all history only more so, an interim report.

The first seven chapters of the book aim to present an analysis and description of the main elements in the institutions and way of life of the landed classes, suggesting their significance for society at large, and emphasizing the forces of change which were at work within an order which in many ways presented a remarkably stable appearance to the outside world. The last five chapters take up the theme of change, and examine the dynamic elements in the economic social and political life of the group, in a sequence of chronological subdivisions of the century and a half with which this book is concerned. The impact of the major changes in the social structure of the country, and

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of the industrialization of the economy, is hinted at, but no attempt is made to treat in detail those developments which were external to the landed interest. The main concern of the book in the fortunes of the influential classes is such that, reinforced by the limitations of space and records, the histories of the smaller landowners, the farmers, and the labourers have been deliberately confined to a very subordinate position—which is not intended to provide a measure of their own intrinsic importance and interest.

It would have been impossible to write a work of this nature without the generous help and co-operation of the owners of private collections of manuscripts, and I am deeply indebted to the following for access to their collections. The Marquess of Ailesbury (the Savernake Papers); Lord Barnard (the Raby Papers); the Marquess of Bath (the Longleat Papers); H. Lorenzo Christie (the Jervaulx Papers); R. F. Dickinson (the Dickinson Papers); Earl Fitzwilliam and the Trustees of the Fitzwilliam Settled Estates (the Milton Papers and the Wentworth Woodhouse Papers); Earl Fortescue (the Castle Hill Papers); Hoare's Bank (the Ailesbury Trust Papers and the Bank's records); Sir Stephen Hugh Middleton (the Belsay Papers); the Duke of Northumberland (the Alnwick Papers); the Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery (the Wilton Papers); Viscount Ridley (the Blagdon Papers); the Duke of Rutland (the Belvoir Papers); Sir Richard Sykes (the Sledmere Papers); the Earl of Verulam (the Gorhambury Papers). As the entries in the Bibliography show, I have also enjoyed the help of many County Archivists, and been able to take advantage of the service which many owners have rendered to historians by placing their papers in County Record Offices. To all these I should like to express my thanks.

In the years that have passed since I began the research on which this book rests I have been helped by many people, not least those who make the discussions of the Seminar in Modern English Economic History at the Institute of Historical Research so wide-ranging and stimulating. In particular I should like to thank Dr G. E. Mingay, the author of the companion study of the eighteenth century, who has read most of the draft and made many helpful comments. But I owe most to Professor H. J. Habakkuk, who originated modern work in this field, super-

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vised my post-graduate work, and who read and made valuable comments on a part of my final draft. Without him I would never have embarked on this work. Without the help of my wife the book would never have been written. She has not only spurred a naturally reluctant author to work, but has developed an enthusiasm for a subject she found naturally dull, and has helped the book on its way with an immense amount of typing.

The research has involved much travel and expense, and I would like to conclude by thanking the Trustees of the Houblon-Norman Fund and the Trustees of the Leverhulme Foundation, who awarded me research grants which were invaluable.

*Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire
March 1962*

F. M. L. THOMPSON

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Note on Abbreviations and Footnotes

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes:

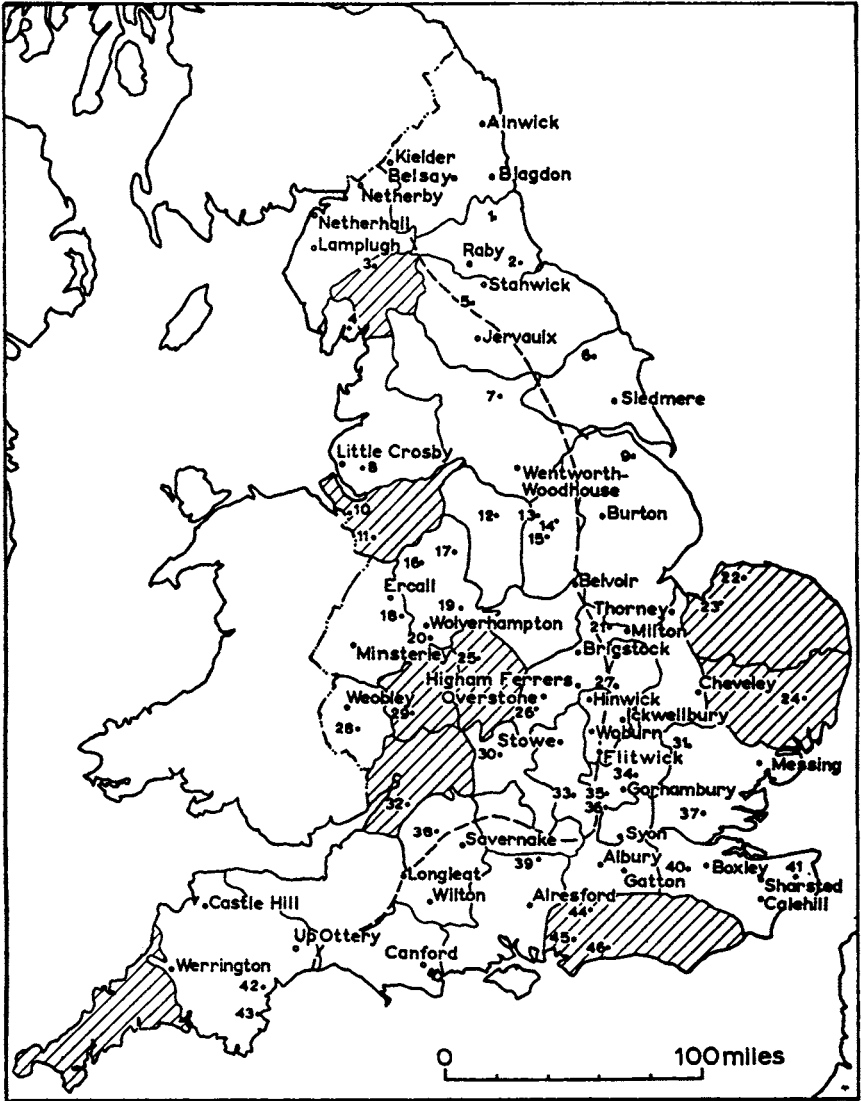
<i>Agric. Hist. Rev.</i>	<i>Agricultural History Review</i>
C.R.O.	County Record Office
<i>Econ. Hist. Rev.</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
H. of L.	House of Lords
P.R.O.	Public Record Office
R.C.	Royal Commission
S.C.	Select Committee (of House of Commons unless otherwise stated)
<i>V.C.H.</i>	<i>Victoria County History</i>

Footnotes have been kept to a minimum, and references have not been given where the source is apparent. In particular, extensive use has been made of the standard works of reference, Burke's *Landed Gentry*, Burke's *Peerage*, and G. E. Cockayne, *The Complete Peerage*, and separate references to these have not been given.

English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century. Map showing the country seats, and the centres of detached estates, which are chiefly mentioned in this book. A selection of other country seats is marked by numerals. All except the shaded counties are represented by documentary material in the study. The line dividing the predominantly corn counties of the east from the grazing counties of the west is from J. Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51*.

Key to the seats marked by numerals.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Lambton | 24. Euston Hall |
| 2. Wynyard | 25. Ragley Hall |
| 3. Lowther | 26. Althorp |
| 4. Holker Hall | 27. Kimbolton |
| 5. Hornby Castle | 28. Garnons |
| 6. Castle Howard | 29. Madresfield |
| 7. Harewood | 30. Blenheim |
| 8. Knowsley | 31. Audley End |
| 9. Brocklesby | 32. Badminton |
| 10. Eaton Hall | 33. Ashridge |
| 11. Cholmondeley Castle | 34. Panshanger |
| 12. Chatsworth | 35. Hatfield |
| 13. Welbeck Abbey | 36. Cashiobury |
| 14. Clumber | 37. Thorndon Hall |
| 15. Thoresby | 38. Bowood |
| 16. Alton Towers | 39. Strathfieldsaye |
| 17. Trentham | 40. Knole |
| 18. Lilleshall | 41. Bifrons |
| 19. Beaudesert | 42. Powderham |
| 20. Himley Hall | 43. Berry Pomeroy |
| 21. Burghley House | 44. Petworth |
| 22. Holkham | 45. Goodwood |
| 23. Houghton Hall | 46. Arundel |



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I

The Nature of Landed Society

FOR as long as the horse and carriage were the symbols of social standing, and possession of stables and grooms the sign of a prosperous competence, the English landed aristocracy retained its predominant place. The power of horse and aristocrat was challenged by the railway, but both learned to recognize an ally as well as a rival in its influence. Both were vanquished by the horseless carriage of the twentieth century. From steam to motor both showed great tenacity in survival, and the power of the aristocracy disappeared no sooner than the last, anachronistic, cavalry charges of the First World War. The landed aristocracy survives into our own times with great social prestige; and the horse survives also, dignified and recreational rather than functional.

The aristocracy was not, of course, dominant in every one of the varied aspects of economic, administrative, social, religious, literary and artistic activity which go to make up the life of the nation, for to that it had never aspired and for that it was never qualified. In politics, church and army, however, and in society as we see it defined in those newspaper columns which deal with the daily lives of the great, England remained, down to 1914, or more precisely until 1922, not merely an aristocratic country, but a country of a landed aristocracy.

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At the opening of the period covered by this book, in 1790, this order of things, the traditional and established order, made good economic and political sense though intellectually it was by no means unchallenged. Agriculture was still much the largest single occupation of the people. The wealthiest individual land-owners were generally regarded as the richest men in society, though individuals with fortunes more precariously based on sugar, Indian operations politely obscure in their details, or City operations of cunning and lucrative simplicity, could already rival them in point of income. Above all, the structure of politics was weighted in favour of the landed interest. And yet by half-way through the period, by about 1850, all these conditions had ceased to exist. Even the most valuable perquisite of landed wealth, the well-endowed leisure provided by its rentier character, could be emulated from other sources well before the twentieth century. The central problem of this book is to discover how it came to pass that the social order based on landed estates survived far into an age in which the initial superiority of the landed classes in possession of the material sinews of power had evaporated.

What did survive was not an unchanging social order. If there had been rigidity, if the landed interest had been ready to take up entrenched positions in unyielding defence of power, privilege and prestige, historians of the nineteenth century would no doubt be analysing violent revolution in this country. The territorial magnates may have remained the apex of the social structure, but it was a constantly changing structure, whose components altered in character and grew or declined in importance under the pressures generated by industrialization. Neither was this apex itself of constant shape and form. The landed classes themselves formed an inner social pyramid within the structure of society at large, and here also the relations between the parts, and the nature of the individual parts, were moulded and re-moulded by the forces of ideas and of economic change. The duchess, her house party and her guests, of 1910 were superficially similar to their counterpart of 1790, but basically different. The leaders whose abdication or surrender was consummated by the First World War bore many of the same names and owned most of the same lands as their predecessors of 1790, but the leadership then relinquished bore

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only a pale resemblance to the proud and confident superiority assumed in the eighteenth century. The problem, then, is also to unravel some of the complicated interactions which eventually so modified the landed interest that its power came to an end without sudden crisis, revolution, or naked expropriation.

These changes, in social habits, political behaviour and financial standing, did not all stem from a single cause, but at the back of them all lay the interplay of the economics of the estates and the households they supported and the social outlook of the landowners. The problems, then, are best approached through a study of the economic and social history of the landed interest and its dependants, set against the background of those events, actions and opinions of the outside world which impinged on them. It is economic history with a difference: for where economic history in practice concerns itself with production and exchange, this must be a history of the economic affairs of a group which possessed a particular type of property. In the main they did not produce anything. They managed their property and they spent their incomes, and a history of management and of consumption forms the most important part of their economic history. It is also social history with a difference: for in place of the single class, or occupational or regional sub-class, with whom it is customary to deal, we have in the landed interest not one but several classes. Some interests they had in common, but others were in direct and sometimes open conflict. Particularly when the controlling element was acting as the champion of the national interest if necessary against the sectional interests of their own subordinates, the whole order was only held together in the arms of a violent love-hate relationship; just as the landed interest was for long held in its position of pre-eminence by the ambivalent attitude of the non-landed who, while denouncing it as functionless, privileged and parasitic, envied and sought to emulate it as the embodiment of all that was admirable in taste, manners and civilized living.

Opponents of the landed interest, whether they were discussing parliamentary reform, corn laws, the state of agriculture, or housing conditions, habitually reduced it to a set of landlords who possessed peculiar advantages for pursuing the normal human activity of furthering their own interests. Defenders and admirers of the landed interest in turn expanded it

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until it included not only the whole rural population, idealized as a happy harmonious community, but also every class and group which seemed to them to have any pretence of serving causes above those of private interest and profit. Thus Disraeli in 1849, with his usual flair for extravagance, claimed openly that which the more well-bred left to be assumed. 'When I talk of the preponderance of the landed interest, do not for a moment suppose that I mean merely the preponderance of "squires of high degree". . . . I do not undervalue the mere superiority of the landed classes; on the contrary I think it is a most necessary element of political power and national civilization; but I am looking to the population of our innumerable villages, to the crowds in our rural towns: aye, and I mean something more than that by the landed interest – I mean that estate of the poor . . . I mean by the estate of the poor, the great estate of the Church . . . I mean also by the landed interest that great judicial fabric, that great building up of our laws and manners which is, in fact, the ancient polity of our Realm.'¹ This was in fact less a definition of the landed interest than an adumbration of its claims to represent all that was solid and permanent in the political and social order, claims which it was scarcely necessary to formulate explicitly until the paramountcy of landed property became the subject of dispute.

The landowners headed the landed interest and controlled it, but it undoubtedly contained more than them alone. The traditional eighteenth-century view, when analysing society into those interests which merited consideration and political representation, contrasted the monied or commercial interest with the landed interest, assuming two different but not necessarily conflicting sets of interests. If discussion necessitated more precise sub-division, then an East India interest, a West India interest, a City interest, a shipping interest and a manufacturing interest could be identified. Early nineteenth-century developments added others, such as a cotton interest and a railway interest. This language of classification cut right across the lines of modern class distinctions. Not only did it make for greater terminological ease and clarity in discussing gradations than is afforded by ungainly hyphenated attempts to describe the varied

¹ Disraeli, 9 May 1849 at Shrewsbury, quoted in *The Conservative Tradition* (ed. R. J. White, 1950), pp. 174–5.

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ranks who shelter under the labels of the upper, middle and working classes, but also it reflected accurately a society in which vertical divisions by sources of livelihood seemed to be more real and important than horizontal divisions by class.

The landed interest in this sense, at least until 1851, formed the largest group in society. Besides the landowners who formed the nobility and gentry of the country it comprised the great body of the agricultural community, the farmers and labourers who were the producers, and the blacksmiths, wheelwrights and publicans who provided them with services. It provided direct employment for a high proportion of the large class of domestic servants and for the sizeable body of estate workers of varied skills and trades. But it also provided the chief means of livelihood for most of the professional men and retail traders of the country towns.

The processor of agricultural produce who was in a large way of business, the brewer, distiller, tanner, miller, or clothier, probably ranked as a member of a separate interest in spite of his close links with the land. But his brethren who catered only for local needs from a base in the market town were still definitely under the wing of the landed interest at the opening of this period, as were most of those engaged in the marketing of food-stuffs. The parson was clearly a member of the agricultural community. Moreover, he was part of the landed interest by virtue of more than the ties of residence and the location of his flock, for the arm of private property reached far into the possession of livings, benefices, advowsons and preferments, and the ownership of tithes, glebes, episcopal and capitular estates showed a fine confusion of lay and clerical interests. Squire and parson shared kinship, responsibility, local leadership and often membership of the bench. The higher ranks of landed society, as we shall discover, extended their presence and influence into many more spheres than these. But in themselves these elements constituted an interest so wide in its ramifications and so widespread throughout the country that at the close of the eighteenth century it seemed as unnatural as it was impossible to imagine that the landed interest should ever collapse, disintegrate, or cease to be the preponderant interest in the kingdom.

Looked at from one point of view, this whole edifice rested on

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the efforts of the labourers at the bottom. Looked at from another it rested on the landowners and farmers, who provided landed society with the organization, institutions, moral and social authority that made it into an effective and powerful entity. This book is mainly concerned with the landowners who were the controlling element in this order partly because they were by and large its wealthiest members, but mainly because their position was at the same time territorial and hereditary. Property in land was not merely immovable, and therefore a guarantee that its owner would have an inescapable attachment to the concerns of a particular locality, but it also formed a real, tangible and visible domain, a territory naturally felt to be under the authority of its owner. The lawyers may have got into a tangle with their distinction between real property and personal property, and their language of hereditaments and chattels took them into a world of their own, but in the roots of their concept lay a distinction which seemed plain to ordinary men. The hereditary nature of the property was perhaps even more important, for it was this which conferred stability, permanence and continuity, this which established the landed family with its generations of tradition and its wide cousinhood, distinct from the mere passing single landed individual. It was this which fostered the idea, often honoured in the breach, that the owner of an estate for the time being was steward of a trust for unborn generations and temporary recipient of the fruits of his forbears' endeavours.

We can see how Burke, the philosopher of the landed interest, arrived at his 'partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'. The idea could be expanded until the permanence of the state and its constitution was identified with the existence of the landed interest. 'Has not the hereditary possession of a landed estate been proved by experience to generate dispositions equally favourable to loyalty and established freedom?' Coleridge asked in 1800.¹ This took the idea, familiar enough in the eighteenth century, that the House of Lords was the key element in the English constitution, the factor which by balancing between King and Commons ensured the preservation of English liberties, and interpreted it to mean that

¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 178.

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hereditary landowners were the source and guarantee of liberty and authority. Some arrogance, and much truth, went to furnish such a view.

Society might be envisaged as a series of vertical interest groups, and the business of politics might be conceived ideally as the reconciliation of these interests in order to arrive at the national interest, but the inner structure of the landed interest was nonetheless hierarchical. Moreover, it was generally assumed that the hierarchy within the landed interest was repeated outside it in less rigid form, for only by the deference of all to the great was social authority and respect established and society held together as an organism, viable as a mere collection of detached interests could never be. Deference and its support, the subordination of the inferior orders, could not for long survive the corrosive influence of new ideas and new economic facts with their insistence that there were essentially but three varieties of subservience and independence, corresponding to the upper, middle and working classes. When this happened the landed aristocracy might be accepted as the leaders of the upper class, and might provide the type to which its non-landed members strove to conform, but it was not an exclusively landed upper class, and a decisive step would have been taken towards the dissolution through transmutation of landed society.

Certainly the landed aristocrat at the close of the eighteenth century already admitted some others as his social equals, or near equals. But these were admitted as individuals who were made acceptable by their wealth, manners and tendency to invest in landed estates. At the head of the landed order stood these aristocrats, 'the Major Barons, or great Landowners, with or without title,' whose pride and hauteur were at their height in the four decades before the Great Reform Bill. Next to them stood the country gentlemen, in many respects their equals in status though not in possessions. Both ranks supported and were supported by the tenant farmers, who conducted over 80 per cent of the country's farming at this time, although there were some differences between the types of tenantry to be found on the great and lesser estates. The small landowners, cultivating their own land, survivors of the true yeoman stock, fitted somewhat uneasily into the structure of the landed interest and were

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liable to exhibit both independence and resentment of the power of the great.

Historians comparing the society of England and Continental countries have tended to imagine a greater fluidity in the upper reaches of English society than in fact existed. It is true that the attempt to turn the peerage into a legally exclusive and limited club was never repeated after the failure of the Peerage Bill in 1719, and that it remained theoretically possible for the sovereign to confer titles on whomever he pleased, in whatever numbers. In practice, however, it was not easy to acquire the acceptability and securely independent means which were essential for the grant of an hereditary peerage. It must be admitted nevertheless that the difficulties in the way of the acquisition of sufficient landed estate to satisfy the second condition were purely personal and financial, and not a matter of legal incapacity as in some countries. In any case the size of the English peerage remained roughly constant, at something under 200, from the Revolution until the advent of the Younger Pitt. The English nobility may have been prevented from becoming a caste proper by the rule of primogeniture in the inheritance of titles, but it was certainly simpler and easier to acquire a title, by straightforward cash transaction, in the France of the *ancien régime* than it was in England.¹

It is also true that it was quite possible for a man of wits, some gentility of manner, no means and humble birth, to win acceptance and even adulation in London society, and reception in the country houses. This was at least equally possible in the Paris salons, and is a sign that the aristocracy were catholic and tolerant in their quest for enlightenment, amusement and diversion, not a proof that they were willing to receive recruits from low stations. The distinguishing mark of the English aristocracy was not readiness to absorb newcomers and syphon off new wealth and talent as it arose, but acceptance and discharge of the authority and responsibility which absence of any apparatus of centralized administration left to them.

It is only superficially a paradox that the caste attitude of the landed aristocracy became more pronounced at the very time

¹ A. S. Turberville, *The House of Lords in the Age of Reform, 1784-1837* (1958), pp. 15, 42.

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that Pitt inaugurated the great expansion of the peerage.¹ Three separate considerations have to be borne in mind; the character of the creations, promotions within the peerage and the relationship between the peerage and the landed aristocracy. Although the creations of his great Administration may have increased the volume of the House of Lords by more than a third, they did not noticeably dilute the strength of its contents. The expansion was much criticized, but Disraeli's accusation that Pitt 'created a plebeian aristocracy and blended it with the patrician oligarchy. . . . He caught them in the alleys of Lombard Street and clutched them from the counting-houses of Cornhill' is beside the mark, for the only new British peer from commerce, Robert Smith who became Lord Carrington, had already ceased to be active in his banking business before his elevation, and had acquired vast landed estates in Buckinghamshire and Lincolnshire. The other banking peer of the period, Peter Thellusson, had also acquired vast landed estates, in Suffolk, and in 1806 celebrated his peerage by quitting his London house and selling the greater part of his collection of pictures, 'being much more inclined to a country residence'. His title, Rendlesham, was in any case an Irish barony.²

The more cogent and contemporary criticism of the expansion, that it caused discontent among the disappointed, claimed that there were 'few country gentlemen of any tolerable fortune who have not thought themselves qualified for the honour, and felt their envy excited by the promotion of some less meritorious acquaintance.' This admitted that the bulk of the new creations came from the traditional source of the peerage, the substantial landowners. For the rest Pitt turned to sources equally traditional: high service in the navy, army, diplomacy or the law.³ Most of these were already allied to the landed aristocracy in any case, for unless they had been younger sons, or members of cadet branches, they would have found it difficult to get a good start in their careers. The great wars after 1793 naturally swelled the stream of service peerages, and this was one cause of the expansion. The other, and more important, cause was political: the forced discovery as other forms of government patronage

¹ *Blackwood's Magazine*, XXXVII (1835), 69-78.

² J. Greig, ed., *The Farington Diary* (1922-28), IV. 224.

³ Turberville, *House of Lords*, pp. 45-51.

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shrank that honours were a financially inexpensive, even if socially somewhat risky, method of purchasing, rewarding and consolidating political support. Once made, no politician has ever allowed this discovery to be forgotten. It remains doubtful whether any peerage has yet been granted solely for the services an individual has rendered to himself by making his fortune in trade or industry; but those who render political services—in Pitt's time landowners with influence or pocket boroughs—have since become more various in their sources of wealth and claims to political importance.

In the second place, the new peerage technique was not simply a matter of liberality in fresh creations, but also of even greater liberality in the promotion of existing peers. From the constitutional standpoint the conferment of British, or later United Kingdom, peerages on holders of Scottish or Irish titles had the same effect as new creations, since it added fresh members to the House of Lords. In political terms this was perhaps the main explanation of such conferments. But in social terms they were very much the equivalent of promotions within the English peerage. Irish titles were generally regarded as junior to those which carried writs of summons to parliament, they 'constituted an intervening grade of social rank'. It was normal to speak of an Irish peer as being 'advanced' to a peerage of Great Britain, because he enjoyed greater standing in this position. Moreover, a goodly number of Irish peers, with large estates in Ireland, were also large landowners in England, while some owned no Irish land at all. It was a matter of consequence to them to obtain a title which reflected their English interests.

This was a process which had operated throughout the eighteenth century; the Irish Earl Fitzwilliam, for example, had been advanced to the English Earl Fitzwilliam in 1746. It was much accelerated from the closing years of the century. To cite but a few examples, the Irish Earl of Shelburne was also a large Wiltshire proprietor, and in 1784 took his promotion as Marquess of Lansdowne; the Irish Baron Delaval was an important Northumbrian landowner and emerged as British Baron Delaval of Seaton Delaval in 1786; the Irish Viscount Grimston was in reality a purely English landowner and appeared more appropriately as Baron Verulam of Gorhambury in 1790; the banker Robert Smith had started his career in the peerage as the Irish

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Baron Carrington, but continued more suitably as British Baron Carrington of Upton from 1797; that the Irish Baron Sheffield was more at home in Sussex was recognized in 1802, as in 1815 was the position of the Irish Viscount Melbourne as owner of Melbourne in Derbyshire and Brocket in Hertfordshire; while the vast Lancashire possessions of the Irish Earl of Sefton were not reflected in his title until 1831. To obtain an English title could be an object of consuming ambition, as we know from Frances Anne, Marchioness of Londonderry, who recorded 'thus my favourite object was attained' when in 1823 her husband the Irish Marquess was created Earl Vane and Viscount Seaham, of Wynyard and Seaham in County Durham, with a special remainder to her own son. On the same occasion the Marquess, never backward in assessing his own proper station in life, claimed that 'one step in the peerage' was the minimum reward which 'has been usual after long diplomatic service', and for himself proceeded to claim two steps, in the English peerage.¹

The same considerations did not altogether apply to Scottish peers, for Scottish titles were not used for apprentice years in the peerage and it was not common to find a Scottish lord whose principal estates in fact lay in England. Nevertheless, landownership did straddle the border, and some Scottish peers were eager enough to acquire titles appropriate to their English estates. Thus the Earl of Strathmore became Baron Bowes of Streatlam Castle, County Durham in 1815; the Earl of Balcarres became Baron Wigan, Lancashire, in 1826; and Viscount Falkland became Baron Hunsdon, Yorkshire, in 1832. But apart from this minority it was desirable even for Scottish peers whose territorial designations remained Scottish to obtain advancement into the British or United Kingdom peerage. This gave them membership of parliament as individuals, saved them from the need to compete for a place among the limited number of Scottish Representative Peers, and thus enhanced their standing. It is perhaps significant that this avenue to membership of the House of Lords was only open after 1782, when the rule of 1711 against the conferment of British titles on Scottish peers was reversed.

If, then, the Scottish and Irish lords who became peers of parliament are added to the English lords who received advance-

¹ Edith, Marchioness of Londonderry, *Frances Anne* (1958), pp. 118-20.

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ments, we find that the number of promotions consistently exceeded the number of new creations. This was the case not only during Pitt's Ministry of 1784-1801, when there were fifty-one creations and sixty-six promotions, but throughout the time from 1784 to the accession of Queen Victoria, in which there were in all 133 creations and 187 promotions. Indeed, the promotions exceeded the creations in every single year except 1797 and 1814, the years of Camperdown and of final victory, and 1835, a year in which the coming and going of Peel's brief Ministry produced two ministerial lists.¹

Preoccupation with rank, precedence and dignity was evident among the nobility. Within this circle obsession with the degrees of the peerage was a new phenomenon of the age. Its most striking manifestation was the extraordinary proliferation of marquesses. A rank almost unknown in 1784, there being but two, no less than twenty-three had been created by 1837, though for some of the new marquesses it was simply a halting place, in the case of Wellington a brief halting place, before ascending to a dukedom. Others less illustrious in service had to wait longer, and had to work hard in intrigue and in display of their political wares, before they received their promotion. The Leveson-Gowers achieved a marquessate in 1786, but had to wait until 1833 before reaching the dukedom of Sutherland. The Grenvilles, as ambitious as they were proud, became Marquesses of Buckingham in 1785, but the son hankered after a dukedom in vain until 1822. Creevey in 1831 saw this same 'stately Buckingham going down to the Lords just now. I wonder how he likes the boroughs of Buckingham and St Mawe's being bowled out. He would never have been a duke without them, and can there be a better reason for their destruction?'² The Vanes languished for over seventy years as Earls of Darlington, but then promotion came swiftly, Marquess of Cleveland in 1827 and Duke of Cleveland in 1833, signifying both the ambition, importance and the particular brand of Whiggery of Creevey's friends the 'two arrogant rogues' of Raby. Charles Brudenell-Bruce, son of the Earl of Ailesbury, wrote to his father in 1807

¹ Calculated from Appendix III to Turberville, *House of Lords*. Royal dukes, successions by special limitations, and eldest sons who received writs of summons in their fathers' baronies have been omitted from the reckoning.

² J. Gore, ed., *Creevey* (1948), p. 323; for the hankering in 1815, p. 128.

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pressing him to apply 'for the title I have so long wished to have, a Marquessate', and added 'there certainly appears no reason why you should not obtain the rank in the peerage to which your immense estates, long attachment to Government and your party interest entitle you.'¹ The father did not press his case, but the son pursued his desire in person and became Marquess of Ailesbury in 1821.

Other honours might be equally acceptable as rewards for services. 'Lord Hertford owes his blue ribbon to his having purchased *four* seats in Parliament since his father's death, and to his avowed intention of dealing still more largely in the same commodity,' observed Creevey in 1822.² It is symptomatic of a change in the aristocratic outlook that these elevations in rank or dignity were effective in eliciting political attachment to ministers, in place of the more familiar eighteenth-century inducements of expectations of offices or sinecures for the nobleman or his relations. Ministers may indeed have had a declining amount of financially valuable patronage at their disposal. But in turning to this alternative method of managing the great they were exploiting a passion for the emblems of prestige which came into existence independently. We may say that with the rising incomes from property from the late eighteenth century the attraction of further accessions of income from sinecures diminished; at the same time the attraction of further accessions of rank increased.

That this was so stemmed in part from the old nobility's desire to see themselves adequately differentiated in style from the newly ennobled. In this they were not entirely successful, since several families who were commoners in 1784 had penetrated as far as earldoms fifty years later, whereas by no means all the older nobility had attained that rank. More important, it seems, was a drive to sort out the nobility into the ranks proper to differing sizes of estates and degrees of general consequence. The 7th Earl of Bridgewater, for example, in 1823 bequeathed property estimated at £2 million to Lord Alford on condition that if he should die without becoming either a marquess or a duke, or should not become one within five years of becoming Lord Brownlow, then the property should go to his brother,

¹ Quoted by Earl of Cardigan, *The Wardens of Savernake Forest* (1949), p. 295.

² Creevey, p. 235.

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Charles Henry Cust, on like terms.¹ In other words the nobility was organizing itself into a hierarchy, albeit using haphazard methods and only partially relevant considerations to attain the end. This full extension of the hierarchical principle gave some measure of cohesion and structure to the landed aristocracy. It was made under the broad pressure of subversive and revolutionary ideas and events, and indicates how the fullest formal expression of a whole social order is not reached until its classic days of unchallenged, and therefore unsystematized, supremacy are waning.²

At the close of the eighteenth century nobles were above all great landowners, but by no means all great landowners were noblemen. The landed aristocracy has always remained a body wider in membership than the nobility. The new creations undoubtedly inaugurated a tendency towards a greater identity between the two categories than had hitherto existed, and families of such indisputably aristocratic bearings as the Lascelles, Pelhams, Greys or Lambtons began their elevations to the earldoms of Harewood, Yarborough, Grey and Durham. An individual like Thomas Coke of Holkham, 'the greatest commoner', might stoutly resist ennoblement at the hands of the Tories until finally accepting the earldom of Leicester from the unexceptionable young Victoria. But on the whole the number of willing applicants far exceeded the ration of peerages which crown or ministers were prepared to dispense, and a great many who could well consider themselves landed aristocrats remained permanently as commoners.

Just how many one cannot easily tell, but the statistics of the 1870s show that just on half of those who had £10,000 a year or more from landed property in England were outside the ranks of the peerage. If we make the test more severe, about a quarter of those with landed incomes over £30,000 were commoners.³

¹ J. B. Burke, *The Vicissitudes of Families* (1888 ed.), II. 390. On Lord Alford dying in 1851 without fulfilling the conditions, the inheritance was contested up to the Lords, which held that the Earl of Bridgewater's condition was invalid, since it was not a matter within the devisee's control, and therefore Lord Alford's son, the Earl of Brownlow, inherited.

² For caste-conscious views see the debates in the Lords on the Irish Union, 1800, Cobbett's *Parliamentary History*, XXXV, esp. pp. 159-176.

³ Calculated from J. Bateman, *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* (1883 ed.), which in turn derived from *Parliamentary Papers*, 1874, LXXII, Return of Owners of Land, 1872-3.

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This last group certainly included a few newly wealthy men of the nineteenth century, such as the Tomlines of Suffolk, but in the main it was composed of old families like the West country Aclands or rather younger families like the Sykes of Sledmere, who remained honourably content with baronetcies, or of county families with respectable ancestry like the Cornish Bassets, the Lancashire Blundells and Cliftons, the Lincolnshire Chaplins and Vyners, and the Wiltshire Wyndhams, who were innocent of all title. If this was the situation in the 1870s, eighty years earlier the peers must have formed a distinct minority of the landed aristocracy.

The landed aristocrats had much in common besides the possession of large landed estates. Their upbringing, way of life, family setting, occupations, avocations, social outlook and political beliefs, though certainly not conforming to any rigid or stereotyped pattern, were all shaped by a readily identifiable mould. They formed a loosely-knit club whose unwritten rules ensured that all members were gentlemen, and it was they above all who formed the standards of gentlemanly conduct. The strength and virtue of the conventions which governed behaviour were that they permitted great diversity and colourful eccentricity, and very rarely produced either that hypocrisy of mere outward conformism or that brand of well-bred inhibition which have sometimes been attributed to the English upper classes. The starchy idolization of etiquette belongs to the aspirants, the new genteel, somewhat uncertain of their position. The landed gentleman could afford to be unconventional without endangering his standing because the solid guarantee of his estate lay behind him. Thus in the revolutionary period when a duke was found among the Jacobin sympathizers, it occasioned criticism of the mischievous folly of his views, but did not impugn the aristocratic status of the Howards.

Nevertheless, individual diversity existed within a framework of behaviour some or all of whose features were generally accepted by landed gentlemen. In politics, for example, differences between factions or parties were normally about personalities, tactics, the requirements of expediency or the scale of priorities. Even parliamentary reformers within the landed groups felt that they were seeking to preserve and strengthen, not overthrow, the fundamental structure of government and

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distribution of power, to which their opponents also expressed attachment. The quality of a gentleman is elusive and difficult to define, and is perhaps best captured from the atmosphere conveyed by the picture of the landed order as a whole. Certain characteristics, however, may be singled out as illustrating the roots of behaviour in the possession of estates.

Honour, dignity, integrity, considerateness, courtesy and chivalry were all virtues essential to the character of a gentleman, and they all derived in part from the nature of country life. Not only did the stability and permanence of country society foster the subordination of personal whims to these traditional and enduring values. But also the intimate nature of country society, its lack of openings for anonymity, its necessary exposure to the public eye of many of the doings of landowners, called forth these very virtues which made for good feelings, neighbourliness and absence of friction. At the turn of the century such perversions as pride and arrogance were widely commented upon, but there is little reason to think that these were ever typical of the order.

A gentleman's attitude to money is proverbially one of lordly indifference, but while there are many examples at this time of recklessness, ostentation or simple disdain of tradesmen's bills, this is too simple a view of the matter. Normally, value for money was expected; where extortionate charges were made the dignified course was to refrain from haggling but withdraw one's custom for the future. Certainly, where an occasion called for special display or effort, a coming of age, a royal visit, a contested election, it was aristocratic not to count the cost. This, however, was but one aspect of a general subordination of money matters to more important considerations. Indeed, for as long as land was chiefly valued for the social and political consequence which it conferred, and the facilities for founding a family which it presented, the profit motive could hardly be the uppermost consideration in its management. Nonetheless, this did not make prudent management, or careful judgment in the buying and selling of land or horses, unrespectable, even if they were by no means universally practised. In general, concern for the well-being of the propertyless poor, who were directly or indirectly his dependants, was as much a part of the character of the landed gentleman as it was an essential

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element in the structure of the deference society. Paternalism, which the outside world found it easy to criticize as autocratic, he looked upon as a natural accompaniment of landed wealth, and indeed as one of its prime justifications. It could be practised to best effect from a well-run estate.

In law a gentleman is 'a man who has no occupation'. Envy and denunciation of those 'who toil not neither do they spin' long preceded Joseph Chamberlain. But if they did not have gainful occupations, landed aristocrats filled their days in a great variety of ways, most of them of great benefit to the community. Some were absorbed by the attractions of agricultural improvement at the turn of the century, and devoted a great deal of time to the management of their home farms and estate. Some gave much detailed attention to the business of county administration through quarter sessions. Others were attracted by politics and either assisted in the business of government at Westminster or in the colonies, or at least helped to operate the machinations by which combinations were formed and patronage was secured and dispensed. Some might devote themselves to the arts as practitioners, and not infrequently excel the professionals. Connoisseurship and patronage of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature or scholarship was widespread, generally informed by a discriminating taste which left great riches to posterity. For many, participation in the pleasures and engagements of society life was occupation enough in itself. The chief interest of others lay in hunting, racing or shooting. Yet none was able to lead a life which was either wholly private or wholly devoted to the pursuit of his personal inclinations. All refreshed themselves, from time to time, at their country houses with country pursuits. All acknowledged, even if only occasionally, that the privileges of leisure were balanced by the duties and responsibilities of leadership and administration which were attached to landed estates.

Individually gentlemen, collectively the landed aristocrats formed a series of families, so linked by intermarriage that they have been likened to tribes. The family interest and the family reputation were normally superior to the claims of any individual within it. Only rarely does an aristocrat appear who was indifferent to the claims of loyalty to the family, its fair name, its traditions and its future, and was prepared to sacrifice these to

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present indulgence. The landed family was wide in extent, embracing several generations and degrees of cousinhood, not usually under a single roof so much as under the protection of a single estate. The estate was expected to succour the inner family, and the head of the family was expected to put the influence derived from the estate at the disposal of the more distant members. Certainty of inheritance, which safeguarded the continuity and integrity of the family estates, did not always make for harmonious relations within the family, but it ensured the permanent importance of the landed family as an institution in English life.

Predominantly, landed families revolved round their menfolk. Those gifted ladies who ventured into the man's world of politics, like the Duchess of Devonshire or Lady Melbourne, were careful to conceal their evident power and prowess beneath a veil of deferment to the male politicians. Nevertheless, there was a strong matriarchal undercurrent beneath the surface of male ascendancy and manly virtues. Not only were the dowagers formidable figures in the aristocratic world, but also mothers usually had the arrangement of marriages, the instruments by which families were made and the tribal connections formed. From marriage the landed aristocrat might hope for both love and good fortune. It was the mothers with marriageable daughters who largely determined the field of selection, and contrived suitable combinations of these qualities. George Lamb, younger brother to Lord Melbourne the prime minister, described the process in an unsuccessful comic opera of 1807:

And every candid female here allows
How hard a Misses life, who seeks a spouse,
At Operas, plays, and routs we never fail,
Put up, alas! to everlasting sale.

.....

At night again, on us all pleasures pall;
Bid for by inch of candle at a ball –
And e'en when fashion's toilsome revels cease,
For us no pause, no liberty, no peace –
Then when the Matrons speak of suppers small,
"A few choice friends besides ourselves – that's all,"
This language in plain truth they mean to hold
"A girl by private contract to be sold." ¹

¹ Quoted by Mabell, Countess of Airlie, *In Whig Society* (1921), pp. 69–70.

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Marriage was rightly regarded as a serious matter, with far more at stake than gratification of momentary infatuations. Social compatibility, adequate provision for children and for the bride should she chance to be widowed, the formation of desirable connections and the advancement of the family's standing were the important purposes served by match-making. Those who escaped from the toils and found spouses of humble birth served to emphasize the conventions through the comment which their *mésalliances* regularly excited.

When momentous issues were at stake, and the rescue of an estate from ill-fortune was in question, the conduct of marriages was liable to be taken out of the hands of the matrons. Necessity impelled an impoverished aristocrat to seek a bride of fortune. An heiress to a landed family was the most desirable solution in such a situation, but one who was willing to unite such wealth to foundering gentility could not always be found, unless a large advance in rank was involved. In default, the occasion called for an infusion of mercantile wealth. By marrying his daughters into the established nobility many a man of new wealth smoothed the path to respectability. This sensible arrangement brought much needed succour to some old families, and provided a means of entry into landed society. Thus private necessities helped to preserve the old order from such rigidity and exclusiveness as might have built up explosive resentment against it.

The kind of new wealth which was absorbed in this way was, however, limited. Lord Sefton's adviser, canvassing ways of clearing off a debt of some £40,000, made this tolerably plain. After discussing various other courses he came to the possibility of the heir, Lord Molyneux, marrying. 'To marry a fine brought up Lady with little or no fortune would be to hurt the Estate. By the Estate [which was currently in 1791 worth some £8,500 a year] he has a right to expect a large sum with a Lady, not to look at less than 60,000 . . . *many* a great and rich banker would be glad of the offer to give his daughter that fortune for her advancement and dignity (vide Messrs. Child), or many a rich heiress to a large estate and of good family would also be glad of the offer.'¹

¹ Lancashire C.R.O., Sefton MSS, DDM 11/63, Arrangements for paying Lord Sefton's debts, 1791.

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Bankers were among the few sizeable groups which had such sums available for investment in the social advancement of their daughters. But the wealthiest set among them, the London private bankers, had the added advantage of close and confidential contacts with the landed aristocracy whose money affairs they handled and very often alone understood. Alongside the bankers' daughters one should place the daughters of some of the wealthiest lawyers, brewers and West India plantation owners, three other groups possessing either close connections or affinities with the landed magnates, though in their case it was normal for the father to establish himself first as a large landed proprietor, before his daughters became marriageable. This method of social mobility scarcely operated outside these spheres. The age of the American heiresses lay well in the future. The case of the three Caton sisters from America, who had completed their trilogy of marriages to the Marquesses of Carmarthen and Wellesley and Lord Stafford by 1836, was then still unique. 'It is a singular instance,' remarked the gossip Thomas Raikes, 'of three sisters, foreigners, and of a nation hitherto little known in our aristocratical circles, allying themselves to such distinguished families in England.'¹

In many respects the country gentry and squirearchy resembled those above them, the landed aristocracy, except in the scale of their possessions and style of living. The homogeneity of the two groups, nobility and gentry, magnates and squires, often thought of as forming the single order of the English landed gentry, was however subject to two crucial qualifications, one social and one economic. The gentry were at one and the same time a more fluid class than the aristocracy, permitting easier entry and exit, and as a result of the provincial limits prescribed by their resources and way of life fundamentally a more conservative class. Taken together, these two factors played a substantial part in the prolongation of the aristocratic control of society.

The gentry had wide scope for intermarriage with their own kind, and used their opportunities freely for improving the interconnections of county families. But the gentry also formed connections fairly freely with non-landed families who were

¹ *Journal of Thomas Raikes* (1856-7), II. 383-4.

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roughly their equals. In such marriages daughters of the clergy abounded, followed by those of other professional groups, but country bankers, merchants, career officers or servants of the East India Company were also well represented in this way. Families of tradesmen who were akin to shopkeepers were not held to be eligible, and neither were those of manufacturers generally acceptable until they had had a chance to acquire at least second generation respectability. Nevertheless, this provided a fairly broad avenue of recruitment into landed society, one which generally proved of mutual advantage to the parties concerned.

Of greater importance was the facility enjoyed by new wealth for the acquisition of social position through land purchase. This was of course no new phenomenon, and fortunes made in trade, finance or the law had long found their way into landed estates. In the course of the eighteenth century the element of pure investment in this process, the search for a secure home for savings, had diminished. It continued as an act of social investment, the surest way to satisfy the urge to found a family. Because of the price of land, its relative scarcity in the market and the level of social ambition of the new men, it was as landed gentry rather than as landed magnates that they usually emerged. The important point was that while fortunes from trade continued to take this route, they were joined by the newer fortunes from mining and industry. In the early decades of this period, while the Sykes of Sledmere exemplified the old practice in their transformation from Hull merchant to East Riding landowner, the new practice could be seen in the acquisition of estates by the Darbys from iron, Matthew Boulton from engineering, the Peels, Arkwrights, Fieldens and Strutts from cotton, Marshall from flax, the Riddleys, Cooksons and Cuthberts from coal, or Samuel Whitbread from brewing.

By no means all successful businessmen sought to set themselves up as landed gentlemen. But that a good many of the most able and forceful could do so was a source of great strength to the landed interest. Money placed in land could not, of course, always purchase automatic and instantaneous acceptance. Established county society often scorned newcomers as vulgar aspirants, and it might take two generations for humble origins to be forgiven, in the course of which it might become congenial or

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politic to sever connection with the business on which the fortune was founded. But fresh applicants for land and status were all the time forthcoming, and the fact that this process of absorption into landed society was continually in motion must be accounted a prime reason for the failure of the cleavage between capitalists and landowners ever to become so deep as to be unbridgeable.

Movement out of the landed gentry was also of consequence in preserving contacts with other social groups. Apart from cases of individual misfortune this was a function of the size of gentry estates, for their resources did not allow of large provisions for younger sons. Younger sons of the landed aristocracy were certainly not debarred from having careers, but these were more likely to be dignified than self-supporting, and to require injections of private income supplied by allowances from the family estate. Younger sons of the gentry, on the other hand, were likely to seek careers which would support their independence. Such careers might simply be the less ornamental versions of the careers favoured by the aristocracy, in church, army or civil service. They could also include practice in the law, other professions, or entry into a merchant's business, while younger sons whose fathers or grandfathers had been in industry might well enter the old firm. For instance, in the family of Cumberland squires, the Dickinsons of Lamplugh, around 1800 we find brothers who were an attorney, a liquor merchant, a grocer and a mariner.¹ This flow from landed families into business and the professions was another important factor in preventing the landed gentry from developing the isolation of a caste, and in blurring the distinction between the landed interest and the rest of society.

Against these elements of fluidity in the gentry class, however, we must set the underlying conservatism of the great body of the landed gentry. However much the gentry shared the standards and conventions of the aristocracy, they did not share fully in their metropolitan and cosmopolitan life. The incomes and habits of the gentry made the county the normal sphere of their activity. Even if they entered politics they could not usually contemplate the luxuries of borough-mongering or contested elections, but would appear as county members seated by the

¹ Red How, Lamplugh, Cumberland, Dickinson MSS, Will of John Dickinson, 30 Oct. 1802, and connected documents.

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consensus of county opinion without expense of contest. County ways and outlook tended to change a good deal more slowly than London habits. Moreover, as industrialization advanced, the gentry in the counties had fewer opportunities and less necessity than the aristocracy for making bargains and compromises with the new thrusting interests which operated at the national level. It was not for nothing that county administration continued in its old unregenerate quarter-session ways until 1888.

Ultimately, of course, not even county society could resist the forces of change. In the late nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century, the gentry have been less favourably placed than the aristocracy in the struggle for economic survival, a return to the situation prevailing in the corresponding period 200 years earlier. This has meant the dilution of county circles by many whose gardens are their only landed property, thus helping in the by no means unsuccessful effort to preserve many of the features of county society, from its hunt balls to its instinctive leadership.

The essential point, however, is that change here came a generation or two after changes at the centre had led the aristocracy either to share power or to accept a lower place for the landed interest in determining the course of government. From their country seats the aristocracy shared the life of county society, and while they were taking part in these central changes they found periodical consolation, reassurance and encouragement in the traditional and unchanging order of the countryside. Indeed, stability in the counties seemed, to the aristocracy, to make possible concessions and compromises on other fronts without incurring mortal risks to the deference society. When, in some heavily industrialized counties, this stability was threatened by insubordination from urban and industrial elements, we find that the aristocracy felt they had reached the edge of the precipice, and that the time had come to abandon compromises and efforts to accommodate the forces of change. Thus in the West Riding in 1848, in the face of a threat from a section of his own party 'to subvert the legitimate influence of the aristocracy of the land', Lord Fitzwilliam felt compelled to advocate 'an union of moderate men of both parties for the common safety'. A friendly critic interpreted this as a desire to put 'all the aristocracy and landed gentry