

*A Gentleman's Education -
The Birth of the Public School Ideal in Mid-Nineteenth Century*

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Abstract

Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School from 1828-1842, is usually seen as the one man who created the modern public school. Yet the public school movement in the mid-nineteenth century was more a response to the demands of a particular section of a rapidly changing society. Arnold and his disciples first voiced and then channelled this demand. Various changes stimulated the growth of public schools and the desirability of a public school education: the spread of railways, the competition for scholarships to Oxbridge, and the growth of examinations for the professions. Perhaps most importantly, a desire for a 'gentleman's education' and the opportunities such an education offered was growing among the aspiring middle class. Public schools offered an education in character: boys were taught first the acceptance of authority and then the exercise of it, 'healthy' outdoor pursuits would curb the tendencies of boys to slovenliness, and a classical curriculum would cultivate pupils and ready them for leadership. In meeting this demand the public schools first reformed, which fuelled further demand, leading to an explosion in the number of public schools throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

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Introduction

The nineteenth century educational provision was effectively organized around what Anderson (2012, p. 484) refers to as a “hierarchy of prestige”. The poor could attend private day schools and Dame schools offering a basic level of elementary education, Sunday Schools focusing on scripture, and, after the 1833 Factories Act, factory schools. The middle classes relied on old provincial grammar schools, newer private schools, and dissenting academies, for those outside of the Anglican faith. For the upper classes there were the old public schools, staging posts for those destined for university, parliament or Church. There was not very much ‘public’ about them: the name derives from the fact that originally the schools were grammars that provided places for poor pupils. Gradually fee-payers accounted for much of the intake. Yet at the turn of the century such schools were in a ramshackle state. Many well-off families chose a tutor-based home education for their sons, others the expanding Georgian army and navy. Public schools of the time had little to recommend them.

A general atmosphere of unruliness pervaded the public schools, run through a form of “anarchy tempered by despotism” (Stachey, 1948, p. 166). Writing of his time at Westminster school in the 1810s, one old boy claimed: "The boys fought one another, they fought the masters, the masters fought them, they fought outsiders; in fact we were ready to fight everybody" (as cited in Field 1987, p. 62). In 1710 Winchester boys had mutinied over beer rations (Custance, 1982, p. 337). In 1768 a rebellion at Eton over the rights of prefects became the first of a series of seven uprisings reaching into the 1830s. At Harrow in 1808, for example, prefects rebelled to reaffirm their rights to flog other pupils. Winchester experienced six other student rebellions, Rugby had five (Ogilvie, 1957). Some rebellions were violent. In 1771 the carriage of a visiting Harrow governor was attacked and the school closed for nine days; in 1797 an Eton staff member was taken prisoner, precipitating the reading of the Riot Act and a summoning of soldiers and special constables and armed farmers. Winchester's warden was held hostage by pupils armed with axes in 1818 and the army called in.

Many public schools were understaffed. In the late 1760s twelve masters at Eton were tasked with the education of 520 boys (Turner, 2015, p. 63). The lack of masters was often rooted in the desire to reduce overheads and turn a profit. The consequence was terror and flogging was used to impose discipline, and rote-learning using textbooks that were outdated and uninspired was relied on (Simon, 1965, p. 98). Masters and pupils endured an atmosphere of mutual suspicion. The brutal and turbulent school environment may well have been a great preparation for the trials of adult life. Increasingly, however, parents shied away from submitting their sons to such treatment.

Arnold of Rugby

It seems incredible that despite this prevailing image of chaos and brutality and the lack of public confidence in them, by the mid-century the old public schools were enjoying a remarkable renaissance. The nine public schools (Eton, Winchester, Harrow, Charterhouse, Rugby, Westminster, Merchant Taylors, St Pauls, Shrewsbury) had by the close of the century been joined by between 40 and 60 new schools (Bamford, 1971, p. 58). Many grammar schools adopted certain aspects of the public school model. Public school was now considered the ideal place for the sons of

aspiring parents. This mid-century renaissance of the public school sector is commonly seen as the consequence of one man's efforts: Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), headmaster of Rugby school from 1828-42.

Arnold followed a first in classics at Oxford with a fellowship. Aged 32 he applied, somewhat reluctantly, for the headship of Rugby school, initially doubting he would have the power to impose his ideas on the school and make changes. He applied nonetheless and was appointed, largely it is claimed on the strength of a testimonial from the Provost of Oriel, that Arnold "would change the face of education all through the public schools of England" (as cited in Walrond, 1904, p. 586). Arnold made immediate changes, installing boarding facilities for the pupils to be run by assistant masters instead of the boarding houses run by local women. The assistant masters were forced to relinquish outside church income and apply themselves fully to the school, salaries were raised to ease this change, and Arnold instigated regular masters' meetings in which issues could be voiced freely. Through this collegiate atmosphere a strong *esprit de corps* developed. Central to Arnold's vision was the need to encourage the idea of Rugby school as a shared community (Honey, 1977, p. 14).

Arnold's overarching aim as headmaster was to instruct and nurture the boys in an idea of Christian 'manliness' that would replace debauchery and violence with restraint and gentleness. For Arnold manliness meant humanity, "an essentially Christian brew, composed of earnestness, gentleness, truth-telling, dutifulness, compassion, and turning the other cheek" (Hilton, 2006, p. 466). Arnold is usually associated with the Liberal Anglican movement that sought regeneration of the established Church through incorporating moderate dissenters and granting concessions to Jews, Catholics and Unitarians to coax them away from embracing political Radicalism (Brent, 1987). Yet Arnold's faith is more difficult to untangle, and anticipates much of the ambiguities that faith presented to the mid-Victorian generation (Hilton, 2006, p. 464; 466-7). Unusually for public schools, the chapel at Rugby school became an integral part of the school, where Arnold delivered regular sermons on the necessity of faith to real-world living. Boys, Arnold acknowledged, were naturally prone to sin. Boyhood was to Arnold a state of riotousness and insolence "annoying to others, like the gaiety of a drunken man" (1845, p. 41), but through constant application boys could learn the responsibility required of Christian gentleman. Work was a sacred duty, though intellectual ability and achievements were of less importance to Arnold than moral earnestness and the diligent conquering of a boy's sinful tendencies in forming a Christian character. To such pupils Arnold would stand "hat in hand" (as cited in Briggs, 1955, p. 152).

Arnold fostered in Rugby pupils a seriousness of purpose. The formation of character hinged on a self-respect that boys would learn by being shown respect from peers and masters. This idea reverberates into our own time, as does Arnold's preferred teaching style: a coaxing of pupils to explore and examine a topic and discover the answer to a question for themselves - the teacher as facilitator not autodidact. The classics-heavy curriculum persisted, though to Arnold classics had relevance to real-world contemporary problems and was not merely the study of a long-dead world unlike our own. French and mathematics were made regular subjects rather than 'extras' added on to the curriculum. A flag flew close to his study that signaled to boys that if they wanted to discuss a matter with him they could. Arnold encouraged the boys to take

up responsibility for themselves but also for the school itself. Arnold entrusted the sixth form with the governing of the boys outside of the classroom, and met regularly with them to discuss how the school could be improved. The independence granted to older boys built on a longstanding feature of the public schools, yet Arnold instructed the sixth form to govern responsibly, not as tyrants exploiting their power for selfish ends or rabble-rousers ever-ready to fuel rebellion, but as benevolent overseers of younger boys' moral path towards maturity, a sacred duty to the school as an institution. In this, Arnold was merely adapting rather than revolutionizing the existing prefect system, aware as he was that Rugby had customs and practices that bound the school to its past and were worth preserving. Arnold's thinking was very much in line with the prevailing outlook of Liberal-Conservatism of the time, that old institutions were far from perfect but could be improved through careful reform (Briggs, 1955, p. 164).

It is easy to buy into the mythology that grew up around Arnold after his death and believe that he alone was responsible for the growth and popularity of public schools in the mid-nineteenth century. Arnold of Rugby became a legendary figure thanks to Dean Stanley's *Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* (1844) and the success of Thomas Hughes' novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1858). Many further afield believed in his greatness. Thackeray, writing in the *Morning Chronicle*, asked "Why had I not Arnold for a master?" Dickens gushed, "I respect and reverence his memory beyond all expression" (cited in Chandos, 1985, p. 264). Yet Arnold was not the first reformer. Samuel Butler at Shrewsbury (1798-1836) had introduced modern subjects and stressed the pastoral responsibility of senior boys. In Arnold's time Eton was growing in prestige under the stewardship of Arnold's predecessor at Rugby (Woodward, 1963, p. 486). W.C. Lake saw little material change in the school after Arnold's tenure (Chandos, 1985, p. 254-5). Pre-Arnold Rugby school did not experience the lawlessness that Westminster had a reputation for; much of the violence of the eighteenth century schools had been stamped out well before Arnold's arrival (Chandos, 1985, p. 255). Arnold's high-handedness too was off-putting for some, who saw him as an autocrat submitting ill-equipped boys to a crash-course in piety.

Arnold did inspire many ex-pupils to become headmasters and build on his ideas, like Charles Vaughan (headmaster at Harrow), Conyweare (Liverpool), and Thomas Priestley (Mill Hill). George Cotton (future head at Marlborough) attended a Rugby in which the presence of Arnold was still felt. Others were influenced by the posthumous reputation of Arnold that Hughes and Stanley magnified, like Thomas Jex-Blake (Cheltenham College, Rugby) and George Moberly (Winchester). Arnold's ideal of headship influenced the foundation of many new public schools of the 1840s and 50s. Yet the influence of Arnoldian principles was mixed; a Fags' uprising took place at Rugby a few years after Arnold's death, and some of the old coarseness crept back into public schools from the 1870s. An Arnold-inspired reform of the prefect system at Marlborough and Harrow was deemed a success, however (Turner, 2015, p. 96). Lytton Strachey tore Arnold apart in publishing *Eminent Victorians* in 1918, seeing him as a prim, pious man whose energies were misplaced. To Strachey, in retaining ancient languages at the heart of the established public school curriculum, Arnold further entrenched long-existing shortcomings of public school education (1948, p.187).

The Public Schools Inquiry Commission Clarendon Commission was tasked in 1861 with investigating the still much-criticised public school system, leading to the Public Schools Act (1868). Broadly supportive of the public school model, the commission did recommend a widening of the curriculum, though classics should remain the staple diet of every public school boy in its ability to cultivate (Young & Handcock, 1955, p. 900, 905). Arnold's desire to establish faith as a guiding presence in boys' lives proved less influential over the long term. New ideas guided the public schools in the later third of the nineteenth century, a form of salvation through sweat, less the godliness and good learning of Arnold, in which chapel and piety was central, than a godliness through games, in which, when facing down adversity at home or abroad, the stoic 'stiff upper lip' rarely quivered. Arnold would have balked at this ethic of 'muscular Christianity'.

Still, Arnold lived on as a presence throughout the nineteenth century. Arnold raised the profile of teaching as a valuable profession, encouraging high-flying young men to enter teaching when formerly they would have entered the Church (Simon, 1975, p. 13). The Clarendon report praised public schools for imposing a system that tamed the unruly tendency of boys while purging the tyranny and cruelty of the past (Young & Handcock, 1955, p. 905). Arnold's presence hovered over the report. He himself may not have proved much of a reformer, but, crucially, "great things were attempted in his name" (1960, p. 212). Arnold supplied new schools with institutional confidence: "In the general need for new institutions to find authority from the past, he provided that authority" (Bamford, 1975, p.71). There was a growing realization that the public schools were now to be cherished as national institutions, due, according to the Clarendon report, "to the good sense, temper, and ability of the men by whom during successive generations they have been governed" (Young & Handcock, p. 905).

Yet Arnold's influence could not match larger social and economic forces swirling around outside the walls of public schools, evident at the time of his death and gaining pace through the mid- to late nineteenth century. The subsequent popularity and growth of public school education is better explained by additional factors such as population increase, the spread of railways, and the growth of the professions. What these developments did was fuel the desire among a broader section of society for the 'gentleman's education' that public schools provided.

Population increase

What marks the nineteenth century off from all other periods of British history is the huge transformational impact of the Industrial Revolution, which, as the century progressed wrought important and lasting change to all aspects of life. What also distinguishes the century is the population explosion. In 1781 the population of the UK was estimated at 13 million; by 1851 it was 27 million (Harvie & Matthew, 2000, p. 11). Britain had become a very young country - under 24 year olds accounted for 60% of the total population during the first half of the nineteenth century (Hilton, 2006, p. 5). With so many children around, vast numbers required schooling (or at least education) of some sort. Most did not receive much or any, some would receive plenty. Viewing Arnold as the chief impetus in the rise of the public school neglects the influence of such a young population on the increased numbers of boys entering the existing public schools - in Arnold's tenure and beyond - as well as the need for and rise in new schools to meet the demands of educating many more young Britons.

This is not to imply that population alone accounts for the increased popularity and number of public schools, only that it is one factor among many. Some schools observed an overall trend upwards in intake over the middle decades; others, particularly the London ones, struggled (Bamford, 1967, p. 12-14). School enrollments can fluctuate for a myriad of factors: economic booms and slumps, cholera and disease, a school's reputation, publicity (good and bad), headmasters, resources, war, and the desire to expand intake (Bamford, 1967, p. 4, 6).

The boom in new public schools of the middle decades was driven by the needs of an expanding market. One indicator of an expanding market is the numbers of people employed in education. In 1851 95,000 people were employed in education, 1% of the total working population; by 1861 it was 116,000 (1.2%), by 1871 135,000 (1.3%), by 1881 183,000 (1.6%) (Best, 1971, p.105). Not all were employed in public schools, though a good proportion would have been, at new schools such as Cheltenham (1841), Marlborough (1843), Rossall (1844), and Lancing (1848) Wellington (1853), Clifton (1862), Malvern (1864). A network of public school masters grew up from the mid-century, most of public school origin themselves; many moved between assistant masterships at various schools and then to headships at one or two others.

With the rising fertility rates, affluent families had too many children at home, 'getting in the way' no doubt. Local day schools may have not been adequate, many private schools took boys only up to 14, before apprenticeships or articles. Alternative schooling at grammars or academies may not have been available nearby (Best, 1971, p. 162). Parents would need to scour a wider radius to find a satisfactory school, and, if this meant paying to send their sons away, so be it. Conceivably, this could have been a factor in the rise in popularity of public schools - boarders stayed away, and thanks to an expanding rail network, often miles away.

The Railway

The expanding railway network from the 1840s enabled children to attend public school as boarders, and allow them to return home when required. It also enabled parents and relatives to visit them more easily (and the Penny Post of 1840 made correspondence much easier and quicker). After the success of the Manchester & Liverpool Railway in 1830, rail construction, passenger numbers, and revenue increased markedly (Table 2). Long-distance rail travel became possible from 1838 with the completion of the London to Birmingham line. Most schools up to then were reasonably close to London, before the rail network spread only travel to Rugby and Shrewsbury would be burdensome, despite the late eighteenth century improvement in turnpikes and roads, with pupils commonly arriving back at school after a holiday well after the appointed time (Bamford, 1967, p. 59). Not all schools were conveniently placed for rail access, which makes a simple causation between the railways and the rise of public schools problematic (Bamford, 1967, p. 60). Yet by 1870 most towns had stations (Hoppen, 1998, p. 289), and with the progressive extension of lines to remoter areas in subsequent decades, many schools would have been more accessible by train even if coaches would ferry boys part of the way.

Table 1: *The growth of Railways in Britain, 1840-1900*

	Lines open (miles)	Passenger journeys (millions)	Freight loaded (million tons)	Total working receipts (M)
1840	1,497			
1850	6,084	67		12.7
1860	9,069	153	88	26.4
1870	13,388	322	166	42.9
1880	15,563	597	232	62.8
1890	17,281	796	299	76.8
1900	18,680	1,115	420	101.0

Source: B.R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), 541, 545-6.

Rise of the middle classes

Victorian society was far from static. Population exploded, cities grew exponentially, and as the economy shifted away from agriculture, society changed with it. Most Britons had always worked for a living. What changed was the nature of work and the numbers employed in it. A marked change from previous centuries was the growth in number and influence of middle-class professionals.

The Victorians inherited the Georgian vocabulary of the lower orders and the middling sort, in time ‘class’ was introduced and even then it was always plural - the laboring classes, the middle classes. The early Victorian middle class was more aware of its position between the aristocracy and the labouring masses than at earlier times (Harrison, 1971, p. 129). What defined them was a certain income and standard of life (of housing, diet, clothing and recreation). Historical figures on social class are sparse and unreliable. What can be traced statistically are occupations (Table 2). The top professions grew steadily through the decades, the numbers in other professions shot up phenomenally.

While the position of aristocracy and gentry remained largely unchallenged, despite protests before and after the 1832 Reform Act and throughout the ‘hungry forties’, the rise of the middle classes unsettled them. Britain was hurtling towards being a predominately urban and industrial future, threatening the traditional form of aristocratic wealth – land – and the middle classes were getting richer but also more politically and culturally significant. As Cannadine (1994; 1998) points out, the upper classes proved doggedly adaptable throughout the Victorian era, diversifying into property, minerals, and rich (often upper middle-class, often foreign) marriage partners. Reform of the public schools was led by middle class opinion, as so much else was and would be through the century (Newsome, 1961, p. 34-35). Arnold himself channelled this reform movement, whose perceived success led to reform spreading to other schools, and in turn the foundation of new schools modeled on reformed principles.

Table 2: *The professions in England and Wales, 1851-1891 (males)*

	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891
Law	15.8	15.2	17.4	19.1	22.0
Medicine	19.2	18.0	19.2	21.2	20.8
Church of Eng.	17.3	19.2	20.7	21.7	24.2
A: Total above	52.3	52.4	57.3	62.0	67.0
B: Other public service and professional	148.6	330.9	372.0	397.7	496.0
A+B: Total professionals	200.9	383.3	429.3	459.7	563.0

Source: K. T Hoppen, (1998) *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886*, Oxford: Clarendon, p. 41.

It was thought necessary to assimilate sections of the middle classes, to share power and ward off potential revolution. Compromise and adaption were the guiding themes. The goal for the mid-Victorian generation, FML Thompson (1988, p. 29) underlines, was “fashioning the elements of a new society in step with the appearance of its material and human components.” Central to the assimilation of the upper middle-class was education. The reinvigorated and expanding public school sector of the mid-century could provide an education in leadership, an ennobling endeavour that would create gentlemen from a growing proportion of society in size and significance (Table 3), ready to share the burdens of state and guide Victorian society.

Initially those assimilated were drawn from the middle-classes closest to the aristocracy and gentry, barristers and physicians at the top of their professions, substantial earners who could negotiate with ease the social graces required of Victorian high society. Later, the provincial industrialists were admitted, trailing the successful admission of people like Sir Robert Peel (educated at Harrow and Oxford, son of a wealthy textile manufacturer,) and William Gladstone (Eton and Oxford, son of a Liverpool merchant). Later still were the aspiring sections of the middle class, who sent their sons away to new public schools, more minor than major, so they could receive an education befitting a gentleman. All were transfixed by the magic of the public school ethos, the surest way to be considered a gentlemen and actually become one. The public school had replaced Oxford and Cambridge in importance. From roughly the 1860s on ‘Where did you go to school?’ became the definitive question to ask someone in order to place them.

Table 3: *Male professionals in England and Wales, 1851-1891, as % of male working population*

	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891
Law, medicine, church	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Other public service and professional	2.6	5.2	5.3	5.1	5.6
A+B: Total professionals	3.5	6.0	6.1	5.9	6.4

Source: K. T. Hoppen, (1998) *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886*, Oxford: Clarendon, p. 41.

A shared identity and values were vital to the assimilation of large numbers of the new middle classes, and the public school ethos encouraged this in fostering a love of and loyalty towards the school as institution, larger than any one individual. This was seen as mirroring the entrustment of leadership of the country, broadly understood, whose institutions were the foundation of continued prosperity. Sharing a school in common meant sharing values – and interests. As Dr Arnold’s son Matthew claimed, “It is only in England that this beneficial salutary inter-mixture of classes takes place. Look at the bottle-merchant’s son, and the Plantagenet being brought up side by side... Very likely young Bottles will end up being a lord himself” (as cited in Briggs, 1955, p. 153).

The importance of shared values among the higher ranks of society was he explicit acknowledged by the Clarendon report. The idea of the public school as national institution emerged:

These schools have been the chief nurseries of our statesmen; in them, and in schools modelled after them, men of various classes that make up English society, destined for every profession and career, have been brought up on a footing of social equality, and have contracted the most enduring friendships, and some of the ruling habits, of their lives; and they have had perhaps the largest share in moulding the character of an English Gentleman. (Young & Handcock, 1955, p. 905)

The increased popularity of public schools was also due to the desire for improvement. Samuel Smiles preached the gospel of improvement, of self-help and industriousness; many bought into it. Entry into Oxford and Cambridge was becoming fiercely competitive, and most of the scholarships available went to public school boys, they were better prepared for the classics inspired exams. This stimulated a scramble for places; there were so many eligible young men about,

certainly more than were respectable positions vacant. This may explain the move towards a more games-focused ‘muscular Christianity’ from the 1860s on. The safety valve of empire was a safety valve for undesirables as well as those desirable – but not quite desirable enough – self-reliant types calm under pressure, destined to staff the colonies as administrators, doctors, missionaries, and military officers.

The recognition of a changing society inspired the push for qualifying examinations and greater professionalization. In 1836 and 1837 the passing of a written exam was required to practice in common-law courts and the chancery court. The British Medical Association was founded in 1858 to oversee the medical profession. In 1858 the College of Surgeons granted special licences in dentistry. This was part of a move towards more meritocratic entry to a variety of professions, inspired by the desire to replace an aristocracy of birth with an aristocracy of talent (Hoppen, 1998, p. 112). The 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan civil service report replaced patronage with open exams for entry to the higher grades of the civil service, though it took several decades before it became standard practice. The cost of commissions into the Army was fully abolished in 1871. The professions became the surest way to respectability and gentlemanly status, a much-cherished value to Victorians. A public school education was increasingly viewed as a first of many steps towards this goal.

Conclusion

The rise of public schooling was more of a process over many decades than a series of events. The reform and growth of public schools was a response to the demands of a particular section of a rapidly changing society. Arnold and his disciples articulated and channelled this demand. Wider changes stimulated the desirability of a public school education: the spread of railways, the competition for scholarships to Oxbridge, and growing professionalization of certain occupations. Perhaps most importantly, was the growing desire for a ‘gentleman’s education’ and the opportunities it offered. In meeting this demand the public schools first reformed, which fuelled further demand, leading to an explosion in the number of public schools throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

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