

## The Gentry

Altick, Richard D. *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modern Reader of Victorian Literature*. W.W. Norton, 1973.

Just below the aristocracy, sharing many of its privileges and sympathies and often connected with it by birth or marriage, was the gentry, or "squirearchy." This class included the younger sons of peers, whom the law of primogeniture barred from succeeding to the family fortune, and baronets (possessors of hereditary knighthoods), who, as a character

25

---

in Disraeli's *Sybil* observed, were a blend of "the nobles of whom they are the popular branch [and] the people who recognize in them their natural leaders." Other important members of the gentry bore simply the title of "gentleman." To these the ordinary people of the countryside continued to owe customary, if not explicitly legal, allegiance. Unlike medieval serfs, tenants and laborers were no longer bound to the manor, but upon meeting his squire the countryman pulled his forelock as a gesture of deference, even as his ancestors had done. In many cases the squire possessed the right of selecting the clergyman who (nominally, anyway) ministered to the parish's spiritual needs, and he also often had one or more parliamentary seats in his pocket. But his most direct and constant effect on the community stemmed from his powers as magistrate. Until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, the first step in overhauling a system of local government that had been patched together across the centuries, he, his fellow landowners, and their appointees governed the boroughs near which they lived, supervising such matters as the care of the poor, road repair, and the removal of "public nuisances" (night soil, dung heaps, garbage, and such). Even after the administration of boroughs was transferred to elected officials, the rural areas, where most men did not receive the vote until 1884, remained under the authority of the squire sitting as justice of the peace and meting out sentences to poachers, fathers of illegitimate children, housebreakers, and similar offenders. For various political and economic reasons the squirearchy, as innumerable Victorian novels testify, set the tone of rural and small-town society, sometimes to its benefit and sometimes to its detriment. Along with the aristocracy, it supplied a valuable element of continuity in a time of rapid social change. It also supplied much of the resistance to that change.

Several major Victorian writers came from the gentry. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for example, belonged to a

26

---

"county family" with an estate in Herefordshire, and Algernon Charles Swinburne's father, an admiral, was the second son of Sir John Edward Swinburne, sixth baronet of Capheaton. And Victorian literature presents squires of every type: Mr. Brown in Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days*, Mr. Holbrook in Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*, Sir Leicester Dedlock in Dickens' *Bleak House*, the leaky-minded Mr. Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Sir Aylmer Aylmer in Tennyson's "Aylmer's Field."

27

---