

The Prosperity of the Gentry in the Late 18th and Early 19th Century

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Industry and Empire: The Birth of the Industrial Revolution*. 1968. revised and updated with Chris Wrigley, The New Press, 1999.

There is, indeed, a relation between the Industrial Revolution as a provider of comforts and as a social transformer. Those classes whose lives were least transformed were also, normally, those which benefited most obviously in material terms (and vice versa), and their failure to grasp what was troubling the rest, or to do anything effective about it, was due not only to material but also to moral contentment. Nobody is more complacent than a well-off or successful man who is also at ease in a world which seems to have been constructed precisely with persons like him in mind.

The British aristocracy and gentry was thus very little affected by industrialization, except for the better. Their rents swelled with the demand for farm-produce, the expansion of cities (whose soil they owned) and of mines, forges and railways (which were situated on their estates). And even when times were bad for agriculture, as between 1815 and the 1830s, they were unlikely to be reduced to penury. Their social predominance remained untouched, their political power in the countryside complete, and even in the nation not seriously troubled, though from the 1830s they had to consider the susceptibilities of a powerful and militant provincial middle class of businessmen. It may well be that after 1830 clouds began to appear on the pure sky of the gentlemanly life, but even they looked larger and darker than they were only because the first fifty years of industrialization had been so golden an era for the landed and titled Briton. If the eighteenth century was a glorious age for aristocracy, the era

of George IV (as regent and king) was paradise. Their packs of hounds (the modern fox-hunting uniform still reflects its essentially Regency origins) criss-crossed the shires. Their pheasants, protected by spring-guns and keepers against all who had not the equivalent of £100 a year in rent, awaited the battue. Their Palladian and neo-classical country houses multiplied, more than at any time before or since, except the Elizabethan. Since their economics, unlike their social style, were already adjusted to the business methods of the middle class, the age of steam and counting-houses posed no great problems of spiritual adjustment, unless perhaps they belonged to the back-woods of the lesser squirearchy, or their income came from the cruel caricature of a rural economy which was Ireland. They did not have to stop being feudal, for they had long ceased to be so. At most some rude and ignorant baronet from the hinterland faced the novel need to send his son to a proper school (the new 'public schools' were constructed from the 1840s to civilize them as well as the rising businessmen's offspring), or to adjust to more frequent spells of life in London.

Equally placid and prosperous were the lives of the numerous parasites of rural aristocratic society, high and low-- that rural and small-town world of functionaries of and suppliers to the nobility and gentry, and the traditional, somnolent, corrupt and, as the Industrial Revolution proceeded, increasingly reactionary professions. The Church and the English universities slumbered on, cushioned by their incomes, their privileges and abuses, and their relations among the peerage, their corruption attacked with greater consistency in theory than in practice. The lawyers, and what passed for a civil service, were unreformed and unregenerate. Once again the old regime probably reached its peak in the decade after the Napoleonic Wars, after which a few waves began to form on the

surface of the quiet backwaters of cathedral close, college, inns of court and the rest. From the 1830s on change came to them, though rather gently (except for

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the savage and contemptuous, but not notably effective, attacks upon them by outsiders, of which Charles Dickens' novels are the most familiar example). But the respectable Victorian clergy of Trollope's *Barchester*, though very far from the Hogarthian hunting parson/magistrates of the Regency, were the product of a carefully moderate adjustment, not of disruption. Nobody was as tender of the susceptibilities of weavers and farm-labourers as of parsons and dons, when it came to introducing them into a new world.

One important effect of this continuity-- part reflection of the established power of the old upper class, part deliberate unwillingness to exacerbate political tensions among the men of money or influence-- was that the rising new business classes found a firm pattern of life waiting for them. Success brought no uncertainty, so long as it was great enough to lift a man into the ranks of the upper class. He would become a 'gentleman', doubtless with a country house, perhaps eventually a knighthood or peerage, a seat in Parliament for himself or his Oxbridge-educated son, and a clear and prescribed social role. His wife would become a 'lady', instructed in her duties by a multitude of handbooks of etiquette which slid off the presses from the 1840s on. The older brand of businessman had long benefited from this process of assimilation, above all the merchant and financier-- especially the merchant involved in overseas trade, who remained the most respected and most crucial form of entrepreneur long after the mills, factories and foundries covered the northern skies with smoke and fog. For him, too, the Industrial Revolution brought no major transformations, except perhaps in the commodities which he bought and sold. Indeed, as we have seen, it inserted itself into the powerful, worldwide and prosperous framework of trading which was the basis of British eighteenth-century power. Economically and socially their activities and status were familiar, whatever the rung on the ladder of success which they had climbed. By the Industrial Revolution the descendants of Abel

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Smith, banker of Nottingham, were already established in country seats, sitting in Parliament and intermarried with the gentry (though not yet, as later, with royalty). The Glyns had already moved up from a dry-salting business in Hatton Garden to a similar position, the Barings had expanded from the West Country clothing manufacture into what was soon to become a great power in international trade and finance, and their social ascent had kept step with their economic. Peerages were already achieved or round the corner. Nothing was more natural that that other types of businessmen-- like Robert Peel Sen., the cotton master, should climb the same slope of wealth and public honour, at the peak of which there beckoned government, or even (as for Peel's son and the son of Gladstone, the Liverpool merchant) the post of Prime Minister. Indeed the so-called 'Peelite' group in Parliament in the second third of the nineteenth century represented very much this group of business families assimilated into a landed oligarchy, though at odds with it when the economic interests of land and business clashed.

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