

BOOK PREVIEW\*

# Whig Society in the Eighteenth Century

BY DAVID CECIL



A Lady of Whig Society—Lady Caroline Lamb, from a water-color sketch in the possession of the Marquis of Crewe.

THE eighteenth century was the age of clubs; and Whig society itself was a sort of club, exclusive, but in which those who managed to achieve membership lived on equal terms; a rowdy, rough-and-tumble club, full of conflict and plain speaking, where people were expected to stand up for themselves and take and give hard knocks. At Eton the little dukes and earls cuffed and bullied each other like street urchins. As mature persons in their country homes, or in the pillared rooms of Brooks's Club, their intercourse continued more politely, yet with equal familiarity. While their House of Commons life passed in a robust atmosphere of combat and crisis and defeat. The Whigs despised the royal family; and there was certainly none of the hush and punctilio of court existence about them. Within the narrow limits of their world they were equalitarians.

Their life, in fact, was essentially a normal life, compounded of the same elements as those of general humanity, astir with the same clamor and clash and aspiration and competition as filled the streets round their august dwellings. Only, it was normal life played out on a colossal stage and with magnificent scenery and costumes. Their houses were homes, but homes with sixty bedrooms, set in grounds five miles round; they fought to keep their jobs, but the jobs were embassies and prime ministerships; their sons went to the same universities as humbler students, but were distinguished from them there by a nobleman's gold-tasselled mortar-board. When the Duke of Devonshire took up botany, he sent out a special expedition to the East Indies to search for rare plants; Lord Egremont liked pictures, so he filled a gallery with Claudes and Correggios; young Lord Palmerstown was offered the Chancellorship of the Exchequer a year or two after entering Parliament.

This curiously blended life produced a curiously blended type of

character. With so many opportunities for action, its interests were predominantly active. Most of the men were engaged in politics. And the women—for they lived to please the men—were political too. They listened, they sympathized, they advised; through them two statesmen might make overtures to each other, or effect a reconciliation. But politics then were not the life sentence to hard labor that in our iron age they have become. Parliament only sat for a few months in the year; and even during the session, debates did not start till the late afternoon. The Whigs had the rest of their time to devote to other things. If they were sporting they raced and hunted; if interested in agriculture they farmed on an ambitious scale; if artistic they collected marbles and medals; if intellectual they read history and philosophy; if literary they composed compliments in verse and sonorous, plitudinous orations. But the chief of their spare time was given up to social life. They gave balls, they founded clubs, they played cards, they got up private theatricals: they cultivated friendship, and every variety, platonic and less platonic, of the art of love. Their ideal was the Renaissance ideal of the whole man, whose aspiration it is to make the most of every advantage, intellectual and sensual, that life has to offer.

In practice, of course, this ideal was not so broad as it sounds. The Whigs could not escape the limitations imposed by the splendor of their circumstances. Like all aristocrats they tended to be amateurs. When life is so free and so pleasant, a man is not likely to endure the drudgery necessary to make himself really expert in any one thing. Even in those affairs of state which took up most of the Whigs' time, they troubled little with the dry details of economic theory or administrative practice. Politics to them meant first of

all personalities, and secondly general principles. And general principles to them were an occasion for expression rather than thought. They did not dream of questioning the fundamental canons of Whig orthodoxy. All believed in ordered liberty, low taxation, and the enclosure of land; all disbelieved in despotism and democracy. Their only concern was to restate these indisputable truths in a fresh and effective fashion.

Again, their taste was a little philistine. Aristocratic taste nearly always is. Those whose ordinary course of life is splendid and satisfying, find it hard to recognize the deeper value of the exercises of the solitary imagination; art to them is not the fulfilment of the soul, but an ornamental appendage to existence. Moreover, the English nobility were too much occupied with practical affairs to achieve the fullest intellectual life. They admired what was elegant, sumptuous, and easy to understand; portraits that were good likenesses and pleasing decorations; architecture which appropriately housed a stately life. In books, they appreciated acute, wittily phrased observation of human nature, or noble sentiments expressed in flowing periods; Cicero, Pope, Horace, Burke. The strange and the harsh they dismissed immediately. Among contemporary authors they appreciated Jane Austen, condemned Crabbe, for the most part, as sordid and low; and neglected Blake almost entirely. If they had read him, they would not have liked him. For—it is another of their limitations—they

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were not spiritual. Their education did not encourage them to be; and, anyway, they found this world too absorbing to concern themselves much with the next. The bolder spirits among them were atheists. The average person accepted Christianity, but in a straightforward spirit, innocent of mysticism and theological exactitude.

Further, their circumstances did not encourage the virtues of self-control. Good living gave them zest; wealth gave them opportunity; and they threw themselves into their pleasures with an animal recklessness at once terrifying and exhilarating to a modern reader.

Still, unseemly as some of its manifestations were, one must admit that there is something extremely attractive in this earthy exuberance. And, as a matter of fact, it was the inevitable corollary of their virtues. English society had the merits of its defects. Its wide scope, its strong root in the earth, gave it an astounding, an irresistible vitality. For all their dissipation there was nothing decadent about these eighteenth-century aristocrats. Their excesses came from too much life, not too little. And it was the same vitality that gave them their predominance in public life. They took on the task of directing England's destinies with the same self-confident vigor that they drank and dined. It was this vigor that made Pitt Prime Minister at twenty-four years old, that enabled the Foxites to keep the flag of liberty flying against the united public opinion of a panic-stricken nation. Nor did they let their pleasures interfere with these more serious activities. After eighteen hours of uninterrupted gambling, Charles Fox would arrive at the House of Commons to electrify his fellow members by a brilliant discourse on American taxation. Rakes and ladies of fashion intersperse their narratives of intrigue with discussions on politics, on literature, even on morals. For they were not unmoral. Their lapses came from passion not from principle; and they are liable at any time to break out in contrite acknowledgments of guilt, and artless resolutions for future improvement. Indeed it was one of the paradoxes created by their mixed composition that, though they were worldly, they were not sophisticated. Their elaborate manners masked simple reactions. Like their mode of life their characters were essentially natural; spontaneous, unintrospective, brimming over with normal feelings, love of home and family, loyalty, conviviality, desire for fame, hero-worship, patriotism. And they showed their feelings too. Happy creatures! They lived before the days of the stiff upper lip and the inhibited public school Englishman. A manly tear stood in their eye at the story of a heroic deed: they declared

their loves in a strain of flowery hyperbole.

They were equally frank about their less elevated sentiments. Eighteenth-century rationalism combined with rural common sense to make them robustly ready to face unedifying facts. And they declared their impressions with a brusque honesty, outstandingly characteristic of them. From Sir Robert Walpole who encouraged coarse conversation on the ground that it was the only form of talk which everyone enjoyed, down to the Duke of Wellington who described the army of his triumphs as composed of "the scum of the earth, enlisted for drink," the Augustan aristocracy, Whig and Tory alike, said what they thought with a superb disregard for public opinion. For if they were not original they were independent-minded. The conventions which bounded their lives were conventions of form only. Since they had been kings of their world from birth they were free from the tiresome inhibitions that are induced by a sense of inferiority. Within the locked garden of their society, individuality flowered riotous and rampant. Their typical figures show up beside the muted introverts of to-day as clear-cut and idiosyncratic as characters in Dickens. They took for granted that you spoke your mind and followed your impulses. If these were odd they were amused but not disapproving. They enjoyed eccentrics; George Selwyn who never missed an execution, Beau Brummel who took three hours to tie his cravat. The firm English soil in which they were rooted, the spacious freedom afforded by their place in the world, allowed personality to flourish in as many bold and fantastic shapes as it pleased.

But it was always a garden plant, a civilized growth. Whatever their eccentricities, the Whig nobles were never provincial and never uncouth. They had that effortless knowledge of the world that comes only to those, who from childhood have been accustomed to move in a complex society; that delightful unassertive confidence possible only to people who have never had cause to doubt their social position. And they carried to the finest degree of cultivation those social arts which engaged so much of their time. Here we come to their outstanding distinction. They were the most agreeable society England has ever known. The character of their agreeability was of a piece with the rest of them; mundane, straightforward, a trifle philistine, largely concerned with gossip, not given to subtle analyses or flights of fancy. But it had all their vitality and all their sense of style. It was incomparably racy and spontaneous and accomplished; based solidly on a wide culture and experience, yet free to express

itself in bursts of high spirits, in impulses of appreciation, in delicate movements of sentiment, in graceful compliments. For it had its grace; a virile classical grace like that of the Chippendale furniture which adorned its rooms, lending a glittering finish to its shrewd humor, its sharp-eyed observation, its vigorous disquisitions on men and things. Educated without pedantry, informal but not slipshod, polished but not precious, brilliant without fatigue, it combined in an easy perfection the charms of civilization and nature. Indeed the whole social life of the period shines down the perspective of history like some masterpiece of natural art; a prize bloom, nurtured in shelter and sunshine and the richest soil, the result of generations of breeding and blending, that spreads itself to the open sky in strength and beauty.

It was at its most characteristic in the middle of the century, it was at its most dazzling towards its close. By 1780 a new spirit was rising in the world. Ossian had taught people to admire ruins and ravines, Rousseau to examine the processes of the heart; with unpowdered heads and the ladies in simple muslin dresses, they paced the woods meditating, in Cowperlike mood, on the tender influences of nature. Though they kept the style and good sense of their fathers, their sympathies were wider. At the same time their feelings grew more refined. The hardness, which had marred the previous age, dwindled. Gainsborough, not Hogarth, mirrored the taste of the time; sensibility became a fashionable word. For a fleeting moment Whig society had a foot in two worlds and made the best of both of them. The lucid outline of eighteenth-century civilization was softened by the glow of the romantic dawn.

. Dawn—but for them it was sunset. The same spirit that tinged them with their culminating glory was also an omen of their dissolution. For the days of aristocratic supremacy were numbered. By the iron laws which condition the social structure of man's existence, it could only last as long as it maintained an economic predominance. With the coming of the Industrial Revolution this predominance began to pass from the landlords to other ranks of the community. Already by the close of the century, go-ahead manufacturers in the north were talking of Parliamentary reform; already, in the upper rooms of obscure London alleys, working men met together to clamor for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Within forty years of its zenith, the Whig world was completely swept away. Only a few survivors lingered on to illustrate to an uncomprehending generation the charm of the past.



# Our Menaced Main Streets

OUR TOWN'S BUSINESS. By Omar and Ryllis Goslin. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co. 1939. 355 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by MIRIAM BEARD

LONGER than any other great nation, except perhaps Germany, America has remained a country of small towns. Relatively, we were very late in developing the metropolis and, even when we grew big cities at last, our federalism prevented any one of them from dominating the national life. No single monster capital, no London or Paris, could overshadow and humble as well as govern our innumerable Main Streets. Only now, it seems, are we entering on a delayed and painful awakening from the long dream of localism.

"Our Town's Business" is evidence of this spreading disquiet on the American Main Street. A certain uneasiness has apparently crept into the corner store and comfortable front porches of that famous thoroughfare. The boosting spirit is stilled. The village—which in America would never willingly endure that name—has not yet grown into a town; the town has still not become a city. Both are stagnating. And our small town pride—was it anything but an anachronism, after all?—is suffering. It is hard to imagine that unique America is menaced by the same tendencies toward concentration of wealth and centralization of power which have already doomed foreign localisms.

When the National Association of Business and Professional Women recently set its member clubs to studying the historic and economic foundations of their communities, the Goslins assisted in preparing the program and, while their book is produced independently, it is clearly addressed to a similar wide and popular audience with similar queries. One will not find in it such new masses of data as filled Dr. E. L. Thorndike's "Your City." The Goslins have not attempted to write a fresh history of purely local business development, though one is so badly needed, or to turn sociologists' attention away from their well-loved "rural psychology" to the unexplored small town psychology. Indeed, they are not speaking to the expert; they are making a valiant effort to bring sociology and economics, gathered into a simple and moving story, directly to the bewildered citizen.

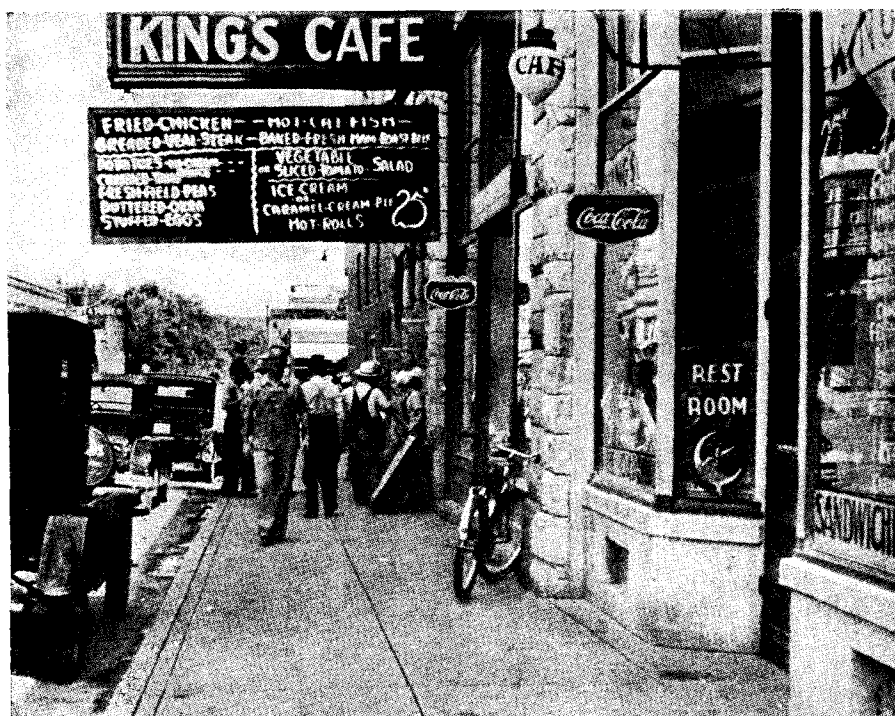
Starting from a rather idyllic description of the self-sufficient community of the past century, the authors show the disintegration of the old simplicity and security under the pressure of mechanization. Progress has been bought by sacrifice: "A community no longer controls its own destiny. To a large extent the American town has lost its independence." Nor has it gained true prosperity. Despite neon lights and platoons of shiny cars, it may be actually "in the red," steadily losing money. Inviting readers to draw up the balance sheet of their

communities, the Goslins provide charts for such inventories.

In chapters called "Can We Buy American?" and "Testing the American Way," the future of the small town is explored. The Goslins find no salvation in attempted conquests of foreign markets; not by looking abroad for customers, but by making better customers of our own neighbors and in developing home resources, is the small town to regain its footing. Pleading for organized planning, though one "designed by ballot," they conclude: "We are not content to accept either the shackles of insecurity or the rule of the dictator."

A simple conclusion, perhaps, but by no means academic, as the case of Germany seems to prove. For Germany was a land of localism, unified only after 1870, when big cities sprang up suddenly, at a terrible cost to the older moderate-sized towns, the heritage of medieval times. In a sense, the Nazi movement may be interpreted as the death-agony of the small town, its final effort to defend itself against bigness—an effort which indeed succeeded in blighting metropolitan and cosmopolitan culture, but which ironically has only completed the work of centralization in economy and government. If the decline of our own Main Streets is not to produce outbursts of ignorance and violence here, there must be much self-searching and enlightenment. The excellent primer of the Goslins, with its simple and temperate style and dramatic picture-graphs, leads in the right direction.

Miriam Beard is the author of "A History of the Business Man."



Photograph by Arthur Rothstein of a Middle Western town. From "Roots of America," by Charles Morrow Wilson (Funk & Wagnalls).

## Piracy in a Whaler

MUTINY AT MIDNIGHT. By Edouard Stackpole. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1939. 245 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by IRVIN ANTHONY

WHEN a descendant of the Stackpoles and Pinkhams writes about whaling ships, he is dealing with things in which he has a hereditary right; and when that descendant happens to be President of the Nantucket Historical Society, and digs up the story of a mutiny in a Nantucket whaler, the reader is assured of both an authentic and a sympathetic narrative.

Mr. Stackpole has not betrayed our expectations. He relates the story of the *Globe* substantially as Lay and Hussey gave the facts six years after the end of the voyage in 1826. Mutiny in a whaler, the murder of her officers, a cruise under pirate articles among the Marshall and Gilbert Islands, an attempt to set up an island