

# GENTLEMEN NOT FIT FOR BUSINESS

A

EDWARD PEARCE

Horace Vachell wrote in 1905, a novel called *The Hill*, a boys' story concerned with the career of a businessman's son, ill at ease at a public school where he was regarded as something of an outsider. Despite captaining the school eleven at cricket, he is eventually caught out in theft and expelled. "One is sometimes reminded," another boy remarks, "that he is the son of a Liverpool merchant, born in or about the docks."

The quotation is one of a devastating selection to be found in Martin Wiener's memorable book *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*. Wiener's argument is that the British never developed a pride in business or indeed a business class with a half adequate pride in itself. The old institutions shrewdly took charge of the new

men. The cult of the English gentleman had a lamentable appeal to the iron-edged entrepreneurs who built the spinning machines, the looms, the hotblast furnaces, the pot banks and the drop forges which were this country's substance.

The sons of tradesmen must seek to become gentlemen. The doors of the (ironically brand new) public schools stood open to extinguish the taint of trade and convert them into fit owners of land, suitable men for the professions, gentrified and beveled. Other countries had either a closed aristocracy bent on self-destruction (Russia) or an aristocracy too fundamentally preposterous to be worth joining (France). Alternatively they were, on the American model, merchant republics prizing profit and deriding preppies.

## THE LORD-LOVING ENGLISH

At the same time the British upper class, predatory but glamorous, learned quickly how to play a profitable parasitic role on the back of commerce itself, while assimilating into its own class and families the appalling men who met pay-rolls. At a trivial level there were and are the letterhead dukes, hired for tone (today we have letterhead politicians). At a serious level there was the exploitation of land ownership to make railways in England the most costly to build.

Very occasionally, as with the first Duke of Bridgewater, a member of the aristocracy might be a genuine creative capitalist in his own right. But the undying genius of the British upper class has been to hang on. Often conceding, never being defeated, they constitute a club which people, for reasons beyond my understanding, want to join. Aristocracy could not be what it is, nor we the little thing we have become, but for the lap-tongued sycophancy which runs so miserably in the lord-loving English.

With all this I go happily along, accepting Wiener's American prejudices as being at least better prejudices than the self-comforting ones we teach ourselves. But there is this difference. When industry was powerful and Manchester a great city, they were resented as intruders. The enemies of Industry and Manchester were aestheticism, agriculture, snobbery, the earliest forms of socialism. Today manufacturing industry hardly needs enemies, though the Treasury seems to be doing a good job. Industry and Manchester are both downwardly mobile today, and know it.

Not only have we lost that famous fifth of our industrial base but the real world of moneymaking has shifted from the black-walled towns of the North (nicely washed in time for their own funerals) to the City of London. Even when they are relatively honest, insurance brokers are far better placed to make real money than any of the ungentlemanly spinners of thread, rollers of steel and other occupants of the folk museum of industrial archaeology.

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## WE CANNOT SURVIVE AS A FINANCIAL CENTRE ALONE

The City of London is able, ironically, to accommodate the spiv and the gentleman (to say nothing of the gentleman-spiv) far more felicitously than industry ever could. Clinging desperately to invisible earnings, we rejoice in our own depraved inner-City area. It is the style today, and nowhere more brutally than in the Treasury, to rejoice at our ability to do well from “a nice little portfolio of overseas holdings”. The rentier mentality which characterised the gentleman’s relationship with industry characterises Britain’s relationship with the successful world.

What we have *not* done — and the gentlemanly view, together with a finance-centred mentality which accompanies it, has much responsibility

for the omission — is to strive and succeed in the forms of science-based technological industry which ought to be our rational manufacture and export base. Look at the integrated circuits industry we haven’t got and you will see the real failure of this country. Contempt, even hatred, for industry was bred in educated Englishmen. Their universities regarded preparation for it as defilement.

And how ironical that the prejudices of the fatuous Matthew Arnold, sneering at his symbolic businessman, Mr Bottles, delighted with vocational education (“all practical work — latest discoveries in science — mind constantly kept excited — lots of interesting experiments — lights of all colours — fizz, fizz, bang, bang, bang. That’s what I call forming a man”), should have been

so completely in line with the Left-wing campaign of hatred against the University of Warwick. For that university tried to be an industrial body responsive and relevant to business. The patronising Victorian Man of Letters and the adolescent agit-prop of the 1960s joined hands in the same sterilising, disastrous cause.

For the truth is that we cannot survive as a financial centre alone, despite the quite embarrassing short-term flash money now being turned over in the City. (Incidentally, the City people, starting at Lloyd’s, had better get themselves honest in some haste, since there is nothing like the loss of a good name for making operators inoperative.)

Even a City innocent of “baby syndicates” and less anxious to hush-up simple criminality could not do all our business for us. This is a little country with a big population. It has 220 years of industrial revolution shaping its demography and the most elaborate class system in Europe. We are not Switzerland and cannot become it. Which is a pity.

## “NO TALENT FOR MANUFACTURING”

Mr Lawson’s Treasury rejoices in high interest rates, partly to discipline employers disposed to make uneconomic settlements, but partly from a psychological contempt for the making and doing parts of the economy. One Treasury Minister, expressing both the Treasury and the gentlemanly ethic with some concision, dismissed our manufacturing trade deficit as “a loss in the tie-clip-making section” and blandly observed that with a couple of exceptions this country had no talent for manufacturing and should keep out of it. Ironically, part of the want of such talent derives from the paternalism which industry was so long bidden by the snob/parson/gentleman to develop.

We don’t compete. We don’t quite deign to compete. But we like to live rather well. Spending is fine, but the customary means of getting are somewhat beneath us. The British seem at times elegantly unfit for any trade except the graceful selling — of paper and themselves.

