

**Much to lose by Revolution, Nothing to
Dread from Reform: Education Reform
as a Means of Class Alliance in Victorian
England**

William Stringer

Many historians agree that the Victorian period was crucial in the development of education in England. In fact Dinah Birch, in her 2008 book *Our Victorian Education* goes so far as to say that it was the genesis of the current English education system.¹ However, the reasons for these education reforms and developments is a topic that is much less agreed upon. The reasons put forth by different historians are varied; ranging from increases in the need for a scientific knowledge to stress brought on by various religious sects and dissenters clamouring for their own schools and headmasters. Yet another factor commonly discussed is simply the drastic decrease in the infant mortality rate brought about by the industrial revolution and the subsequent increase in the amount of children living long enough to attend school. While I don't dispute any of these influences, I would argue that the driving force behind changes in education at the time was class interests. By that I mean that class conflict, and attempts to dissuade it, was the engine which drove the Victorians to reform first their choice of enfranchised and then their secondary education system.

As industrial capitalism grew throughout the Victorian Era, the expansion of the middle class which accompanies such a socio-economic system created stress for the political elite, the traditional producers of policy. In France, this transition from a feudal system with an absolute Monarchy ended in the French Revolution. But policy makers in England transitioned in a different way, reform. As Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby (1828-1842)² and avid political

¹ Dinah Birch, *Our Victorian Education* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), vii-ix.

² Michael McCrum, *Thomas Arnold, Headmaster: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 132-133.

writer,³ put it in 1832, “I have much to lose by revolution; I have nothing to dread from reform.”⁴ Thomas Arnold believed very strongly in reform and set about doing so in Rugby with a vengeance (although whether the changes he made were drastic or not is much debated).⁵ This appeared to be the mindset which was adopted by the British politicians from the 1830’s until the 1870’s first via the enfranchisement of members of the middle class with the first reform act of 1832 and later with the Endowed Schools Act of 1869 which sought to improve middle-class education.⁶ The enfranchisement of the middle class was therefore beneficial to two classes; obviously it benefitted the middle class but in a subtler way it also benefitted the upper class. The middle class, in gaining the right to vote and becoming fully fledged citizens, clearly benefitted. The upper class benefitted by creating an alliance with the middle class which weakened the potential for an alliance between the lower and middle classes.

The first reform act literally melded the interests of the two classes, by enfranchising the middle class, the English upper class gave them a stake in preserving the status quo and discouraging revolution. Once again we can look to Thomas Arnold to see the logic behind this,

Revolutionist, these are the party most to be dreaded. As yet, happily, they are but a small minority, and they may be made continually smaller and smaller if the government act manfully and honestly, and by fearlessly reforming whatever is bad in every existing

³ John Roach, *A History of Secondary Education in England, 1800-1870* (London: Longman, 1986), 246-247.

⁴ Thomas Arnold, *The miscellaneous works of Thomas Arnold, collected and republished*. London, 1845. *The Making of the Modern World*, web, <http://find.galegroup.com/ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/mome/infomark.do?&source=gale&prold=MOME&userGroupName=norm94900&tabId=T001&docId=U3610578273&type=multipage&contentSet=MOMEArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> , 235-236.

⁵ Roach, *History*, 245-248.

⁶ David Ian Allsobrook, *Schools for the shires: The reform of middle class education in mid-Victorian England*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 11, 6-7.

institution, leave those who wish for *more than reform* without a single supporter, except the unprincipled and the desperate.⁷ Here Arnold sees the number of truly revolutionary members of society as a “small minority” which through governmental reform can be made continually smaller. He then makes the further point, that reform makes revolution unattractive to anyone other than the “unprincipled and the desperate” or in other words, the lowest of the lower classes (in combination perhaps with other “unprincipled” and “desperate” members of other class, criminals, debtors, atheists, etc.). This then creates a more centrally located nexus of power politically by shifting power from the very far right towards the center-right. Any who are so conservative that they are against all reform are forced to see their actions as inciting revolution.

Therefore, with the interests of the top two classes tied together in one anti-revolutionary bulwark, how then did education reform become an important cog in this machine? In his book, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, Martin J. Wiener argues that the Victorian Era was one of accommodation and absorption in which the industrial middle class accommodated the cultural views of the aristocracy and the aristocracy absorbed the middle class into the ruling elite class.⁸ Though his argument differs than mine in focus and purpose, I agree with him on a key point, that education was the primary institution of this merger.⁹

In my opinion the pressing need for education reform, and its role in class consolidation began before Wiener begins the focus of his book, in 1832 with the enfranchisement of the middle class. At this point the political system was now being voted on by a middle class which

⁷ Arnold, *The miscellaneous works*, 237.

⁸ Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980: New Edition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11-16.

⁹ Wiener, *Culture*, 11.

was not receiving any systematized secondary education. This worrying situation was commented on by Thomas Arnold who said in a letter to the Sheffield Courant as the reform bill of 1832 was being passed that, “the education of the middling classes at this time, is a question of the greatest National Importance.”¹⁰ Arnold, as an educator and informed political actor saw the dangers of an uninformed and uneducated voting population. What then *was* the current state of education for the middle class?

Members of the Victorian middle class were faced with an unwieldy, unregulated, and often underfunded system of secondary education. David Ian Allsobrook describes it thus, “A copse of seven or eight hundred endowed grammar schools was accompanied by a dense and ever-changing thicket of private schools, and a staid and limited plantation of promising proprietary schools.”¹¹ In other words there were three basic types of secondary school for the middle class; endowed grammar schools of a very large number and varying levels of quality, private schools of a similarly large number and quality as their grammar school cousins, and lastly propriety schools of a small number and high quality. Of these, the type with the most literature and information available is the grammar schools. The private schools on the other hand, have far less information available but according to John Roach, the private schools were mostly small and provided a significantly large portion of the education for the middle class.¹² While Private schools were a critical part of the education system in the Victorian Era, the lack of information available for them makes them difficult to incorporate into the argument put forth in this paper, particularly when compared to the boarding schools which I will now discuss.

¹⁰ Ibid, 227

¹¹ Allsobrook, *shires*, 3

¹² Roach, *History*, 4.

The endowed grammar schools of the Victorian period were a smaller representation of the state of middle-class secondary education as a whole; widespread, differentiated, and increasingly unable to keep up with varied demands on education. The ancestor of the Victorian grammar school was the Tudor grammar school which first originated in 1518.¹³ They were originally funded by endowments which paid for the charitable teaching of both genders and all classes the classics as well as basic elementary subjects.¹⁴ Lowood Institution from *Jane Eyre* is almost certainly of this type of endowed grammar school. During the nineteenth century this changed. The lower classes no longer desired to send their children to a school which taught the classics and they stopped receiving a free elementary education at the grammar school.¹⁵ Instead grammar schools of the Victorian period filled the gap between the lower classes who possibly received a basic elementary education and the upper classes who most likely received their education in the home from a private tutor or went to one of expensive public schools. In urban areas, members of the prosperous commercial middle class were the main consumers of the endowed grammar schools and they adjusted accordingly.

A key change in order to attract middle-class students made by the grammar schools was that of the curriculum, which began to include commercial and scientific subjects as an alternative to or along with the traditional classics.¹⁶ This was done in order to prevent a decrease in attendance that could result from a curriculum lacking in more utilitarian subjects. Such a slump was observed in industrial Sheffield in 1828 where the commissioners of a grammar

¹³ Sanderson, *Change*, 33.

¹⁴ Sanderson, *Change*, 34.

¹⁵ Sanderson, *Change*, 34.

¹⁶ Sanderson, *Change*, 34.

school noted of their school, “It’s present reduced condition is rather to be ascribed to the preference given by the inhabitants to a mercantile education, than to any neglect or inattention on the part of the teachers.”¹⁷ In the increasingly utilitarian world of industrial capitalism, middle-class parents began to question the importance of the classics for their children, who in commerce would be better served with practical knowledge. An excellent example of this is found in the Novel *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell, the setting of which is roughly concurrent with the aforementioned commissioners report in Sheffield. This tirade by the caring but prickly mother of middle-class businessman John Thornton perfectly illustrates the problems that classics focused grammar schools had in attracting members of the commercial middle class,

I have no doubt the classics are very desirable for people who have leisure. But, I confess, it was against my judgement that my son renewed his study of them. The time and place in which he lives, seem to me to require all his energy and attention. Classics may do very well for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of today.¹⁸

However, not all members of the middle-class wanted their children taught in commercial subjects rather than the classics. The classics were seen as the pillar and summit of English education as well as the mark of a gentlemanly education and were required in order to pass the entrance examinations into the Universities such as Oxford or Cambridge.¹⁹ It was possible to pass the examination and gain entrance into these colleges if one attended a high quality grammar school.²⁰ It is possible that Fred Vincy attended one of these quality grammar schools before being accepted into college in the novel *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, in which the

¹⁷ Roach, *History*, 72.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 113.

¹⁹ Allsobrook, *shires*, 5.

²⁰ Sanderson, *Change*, 35.

setting is sometime in the 1830's.²¹ However, if Mr. Vincy's doting and spendthrift nature is anything to judge then Fred likely attended one England's public schools which were "highly attractive to social groups of parents somewhat below the traditional clientele... [evidenced by a] rise of business families beginning to send their sons... in the 1830s and 1840s."²² Regardless of whether or not Fred Vincy attended a endowed grammar school or an expensive public school there is clear evidence that some wealthier or more ambitious middle class families expected their children to receive a quality education with a curriculum full of the classics.

What then was the state of the middle-class education in the Victorian period? Thomas Arnold, described it in 1832 as "a great multitude of what are called English, or commercial schools, at which a large proportion of the sons of farmers and of tradesmen receive their education... commonly they are private undertakings.... there is now no restriction upon the business of a schoolmaster; and no inquiry made as to his qualifications."²³ While this is not necessarily a condemnation of the current system of schooling it in no way expresses any confidence in the current system of education and rather stresses the unmonitored system and even brings into question the worthiness of the schoolmasters. In 1861 in the "Cornhill Magazine," John Sutcliffe gives a description of middle-class education which states,

The education of the children of all between the labouring and artisan class below, and the aristocracy and gentry above, may be characterized, with an extremely small grain of qualification, as shallow; covering an extensive area, showy, but unsubstantial, and

²¹ Rosemary Ashton, *Introduction to Middlemarch*, by George Eliot (London: Penguin, 1994), viii.

²² Sanderson, *Change*, 38.

²³ Arnold, *The miscellaneous works*, 227-228.

especially wanting in thoroughness. This means, of course, that it hardly deserves the name of education at all.²⁴

This description nearly three decades later is a scathing indictment of the current level of the education of the middling classes. Sutcliffe stresses the broad nature of the education received which is, by nature of its width, extremely shallow and insubstantial. This sentiment is echoed in the secondary sources which argue that grammar schools were often stuck in a strange limbo between secondary and elementary education with some students wishing to learn the classics and proceed to college and a larger number wishing to learn more basic and functional knowledge before leaving school to join the business world at an age younger than their more ambitious peers.²⁵ The differences in these two objectives made it difficult for the grammar schools to do either very efficiently.

This, then, was the state of middle-class education in the 1860's. And this mess was becoming an increasingly sore point among the growing middle-class who was paying to send their sons and daughters to these schools. An example of this is the searing critique by John Sutcliffe I transcribe earlier. This critique was not published in a newspaper or academic journal it was published in a popular magazine, *The Cornhill Magazine*, with a readership of "millions" of middle-class citizens according to the author.²⁶ As mentioned earlier, any unrest among the middle-class was always viewed with concern by the ruling class who still lived in the shadow of the guillotine looming on the continent. Therefore, it was in the interest of Parliament and the

²⁴ John Sutcliffe, "Middle Class and Primary Education in England: Past and Present," *Cornhill Magazine*, July 1861, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/docview/6825873/fulltext/1?accountid=12964>, 50.

²⁵ Roach, *History*, 3.

²⁶ Sutcliffe, *Cornhill*, 50.

ruling elite to address the educational concerns of the middle class, which were not only a question of knowledge, but also of opportunity.

The need for education reform for the middle classes was therefore an obvious one but it required Parliament to actually have an understanding of the current educational situation. To gather a more comprehensive knowledge of the state of middle-class education parliament created the Schools Inquiry Commission in 1864.²⁷ This commission set out to exhaustively research the state of education in both the endowed grammar schools and the private schools which were attended by the middle class.²⁸ In doing so they created reports, published in 1868, on over “seven hundred and eighty-two endowed schools... 36,874 boys were educated in them.”²⁹ This represents a complete list on all of the endowed grammar schools in England and it shows that a relatively small number of boys attended them. In fact, the commission estimated that there were approximately 255,000 boys who required secondary education which meant that only about 20 percent were attending grammar schools and that the rest were either “educated in private schools, or at home, or not at all.”³⁰ That number represents a large majority, and while many were likely being educated at home or in private schools there was still a very large number which were probably not receiving any education at all. The commission also found proof, in the form of interviews and surveys; namely that different middle-class families were seeking different levels of education for their children. Often the schools nearby were either too

²⁷ Allsobrook, *shires*, 2.

²⁸ Roach, *History*, 282.

²⁹ Roach, *History*, 282.

³⁰ Roach, *History*, 262.

expensive, not comprehensive enough in their curriculum, or simply nonexistent.³¹ This state of affairs demanded address.

The Schools Inquiry Commission did not limit their report to a list of the current state of affairs, but also gave recommendations on what they thought should be done. These recommendations, given in 1869, came to be known as the Taunton Commission and were named after the head of the Schools Inquiry Commission, Lord Taunton.³² This commission recommended a three-tiered system of grading for the schools.³³ These grades would be based on the length of time the students were expected to stay in school and on the curriculum they would be taught. The grades were thus,

The first grade would be basically classical, would be based on the requirements of a university course, and would take boys up to the age of 18. The second grade, taking boys up to about 16, would prepare boys for business and for many professions. Parents of such boys had no desire for Greek and little for Latin, while there was a strong interest in English, mathematics, natural science and modern languages. The third grade would take boys up to about 14. These schools would be designed for the sons of small farmers, shopkeepers and superior artisans.³⁴

The commission hoped that this grading system would help inform parents of the level of schooling that would be achieved at each school and would also help lead to more clarity for the cost and worth of each school. Of all of these grades, the grade which the commission recommended the most immediate attention was the third grade of which there “was hardly any public provision.”³⁵ I would argue that the reasoning for the focus on this level of schooling was

³¹ Roach, *History*, 262-263.

³² Allsobrook, *shires*, 4-5.

³³ Allsobrook, *shires*, 6.

³⁴ Roach, *History*, 263.

³⁵ Roach, *History*, 263.

two-fold. First, as the commission stated, this sector of schooling was the one most in need of attention. Second, and less obviously, because these schools were typically attended by the lower-middle-class and that was the level of society closest to the working class and therefore closest to becoming revolutionary. It was therefore necessary for commission and for Parliament to address their concerns in an expedient manner.

Another interesting recommendation of the commission found in the commission was repeated appeals to stop or alter the system of free admission to the endowed grammar schools. In his report T H Green “judged that the result of free admission to school was ‘so to lower the general character of the school.’ ”³⁶ The removal of free admission to the grammar schools would create a further difference between the lower-middle-class and the lower classes by keeping their children from mingling together. This differentiation would also bring the middle class closer into common cause with the Upper classes who also received secondary education and whose donors helped subsidize the secondary education of their children. This had the effect of creating a “remarkably homogenous and cohesive” social elite which shared common values, outlook, and education which were cultivated in the Public Schools and in the Grammar schools which came to be modeled after them.³⁷

In conclusion, the collective effect of first the First Reform Act of 1832 and then the later Education Reform Commissions of the late 1860’s was the consolidation the social elite in Victorian England. This social elite was composed of the traditional aristocracy, but also the newly included middle-class. The merger took place over the course of several decades beginning first in 1832 with the inclusion of the middle-class in the political system by

³⁶ Roach, *History*, 287.

³⁷ Wiener, *Culture*, 11,17.

enfranchisement. The integration continued throughout the middle of the Victorian period and was carried out primarily by the education system which sought to educate the upper two classes together at the exclusion of the lowest class. The combined effect of first enfranchisement and then cultural and social education was that middle-class interest became welded together with upper-class interest and were separated from the lower class. This had the effect of preventing any revolution or overthrow of the aristocratic upper class which continued to be member of the ruling hegemony.

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