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Change and Continuity in the Nineteenth Century - The Public School Experience

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The novel *Sinister Street* by Compton MacKenzie is remembered as a wonderfully vivid fictionalised account of the Oxford experience. A long novel originally published in two volumes, the first volume, *Sinister Street*, traces the protagonist's public school life in the final decade of the nineteenth century. *Sinister Street* captures well life at a public school at the end of Queen Victoria's reign, particularly the march of an expanding middle class into the schools, the clash between classics and modern subjects, the role of sports, and the persistence of the gentlemanly ethos. It also illuminates the close of the nineteenth century, as events in the wider world impinge on the school and those who are part of it. In being firmly autobiographical, *Sinister Street* is a useful means of understanding the historical continuity and change that public schools underwent at the close of the nineteenth century.

Tom Brown's School Days (1857) was the first of a long list of fiction on the public school experience. Many writers, some great, most much less so, have produced novels or short stories focusing on the public school, including Dean Farrar's *Eric, or, Little by Little*, Talbot Baines Reed's stories for *The Boy's Own Paper* (1879), Kipling's *Stalky & Co* (1899), P. G. Wodehouse's novels of the early twentieth century, Forster's *The Longest Journey* (1907), Ernest Raymond's *Tell England* (1922), and James Hilton's *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1934). A large number of these are autobiographical. Some are loosely based on the author's own school life, such as Kipling's *Stalky & Co* and Arnold Lunn's *The Harrovians* (1912). Others are more much more firmly

autobiographical, like Alec Waugh's *The Loom of Youth* (1917). Public school novels tell us about the day to day rigmarole of chapel, lessons, games, and dormitory exploits, allow access to the boy mind, and serve as a useful mine of historical information about the wider world of which the school itself is one small part.

Sinister Street (1913-14) by Compton Mackenzie is not often placed among the list of public school novels. It is remembered, if it is remembered at all, as an 'Oxford' novel, perhaps even the greatest of Oxford novels. A long novel, originally published in two volumes, *Sinister Street* brilliantly captures the pre-1914 Oxford, before the war itself cast shadows over the dreamy spires. It is now usually grouped (wrongly) with other 'university novels' such as those by Kingsley Amis, Malcolm Bradbury, and David Lodge, satires that deal with the post-war redbrick university experience from a lecturer's perspective (Bogen, 2006). *Sinister Street* sold 35,000 copies within a year of publication, building on the success of his second novel *Carnival* (1912). *Sinister Street* was fortunate enough to both receive a front-page review in the *Daily Mail* and to make it onto the banned list of books for the Boots and W. H. Smith circulating libraries. In the author's view the 'artificial aid of prurient curiosity' (1964, p. 196) helped the novel become a best seller, and once sales picked up the circulating libraries started stocking the book. Important too was the critical acclaim. Henry James thought highly of Mackenzie, classing him among 'the greatest talent of the new generation' (cited in Mackenzie, 1964, p. 211); and Ford Maddox Ford praised the first volume of *Sinister Street* for capturing 'the history of a whole class, a whole region, during a whole period of life' (cited in Linklater, 1992, p. 129). Critics saw Volume Two as less a piece of psychological realism like Volume One than a richly romantic memorial to Oxford in prose form (Bogen, 2006). Edward Gosse classed it as 'far and away the best account of university life that was ever written' (cited in Mackenzie, 1964, p. 236). To Max Beerbohm 'There is no book on Oxford like it ... It gives you the actual Oxford experience. What Mackenzie has miraculously done is to make you feel what each *term* was like' (cited in Linklater, 1992, p. 131). Yet *Sinister Street* is more than an

'Oxford' novel. Volume One deserves to be taken seriously as a useful window into the late nineteenth century public school experience.

The middle class in search of an education

Volume One of *Sinister Street* takes place at the end of a far-reaching reform and expansion of English public schools. Simon (1975) breaks this process into three stages: the reforms of the 1830s and 1840s undertaken by Arnold at Rugby School and inspired by him at other schools; a period of expansion in the number of schools and an effort to eradicate the worst excesses and deficiencies at the older schools, and the emergence by 1870 of a system of schools sharing an ethos and identity vis-à-vis the democratic pressures of the state and wider society; and a period up to 1914 that saw athleticism, patriotism, and militarism pushed to the fore of the public school ethos to better reflect and meet the needs of a period of imperial growth and increased competition.

By the late nineteenth century, public schools were more numerous, more geographically spread out beyond the south east, and were less exclusive than their early- or even mid-century equivalents. David Newsome (1961) views the driver of public school reform and expansion as the emerging middle class. From the 1830s an ethos of Arnoldian 'godliness and good learning' gradually replaced the lack of positive purpose evident at public schools during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This was middle class in origin and inspiration. As Newsome (1961, p. 34-5) highlights,

> the middle classes, already economically powerful and – as the century progressed – increasing steadily in their political significance, were gradually displacing the aristocracy as the arbiters of taste, the guardians of morality and as the power that dictated and defined contemporary conventions and values.

The consequence the rise of the middle class during the nineteenth century was 'the emergence of the public schools as important national

institutions' (1961, p. 35) tasked with moulding future generations of men who would assume positions of responsibility and maintain that cherished Victorian ideal of respectability.

The desire for a certain type of education grew along with the increase in the numbers who could afford it. By the middle of the nineteenth century Britain had become a very young country, and even though the birth rate fell steadily from 1876 slowing down a long period of population growth, around a third of the population in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was under 15 years old (Searle, 2004). Larger numbers of boys from middle class homes required educating, often at the existing public schools or growing numbers of new schools such as Cheltenham (1841), Marlborough (1843), Rossall (1844), Lancing (1848), Wellington (1853), Clifton (1862), Haileybury (1862) and Malvern (1864). Many more schools across the country were established over the next few decades, adopting the code and curriculum of their more ancient and prestigious counterparts. It is difficult to estimate the number of public schools at the end of the nineteenth century, yet a rough indication of how much the public school sector expanded is that the Headmasters' Conference of 1900 was attended by delegates from 100 schools (Searle, 2004). That public schools were established up and down the country was possible in part by an improved coach service and an expanding railway network, which opened up a much wider catchment area for schools accepting boarders from across the country and from abroad from those families in colonial service, the military, or overseas trade (Sanderson, 1995). The Penny Post of 1840 made correspondence between parents and their sons much easier and quicker.

An inkling of the broadening base of public school education comes when Michael Fane starts at a local kindergarten on the same day as two other boys. One is the son of a solicitor, the other the son of a critic. Their origins belie the shifting class basis of education in the late nineteenth century. Awaiting their audience with the headmaster, the boys are eager to place themselves within a hierarchy of prestige. Both of the father's occupations would have been considered middle class, though the prestige associated

with the position of 'critic' would have been shakier than the solidity and stolidity of the role of solicitor.

Historical figures on social class are sparse and unreliable. Identities were variegated and shifting, and much subtler than the monolithic class tag fostered on nineteenth century contemporaries implies (Heywood, 2000). Within the middle class were the disparities of wealth existing between those in the middle tier of British society living off dividends, fees, profits, or salaries (Searle, 2004). Also important were distinctions of status, between say 'entrepreneurial' and 'professional' sections (Heywood, 2000), though in terms of the funds needed to support a middle-class lifestyle, £160 per year was deemed satisfactory (Searle, 2004). The numbers in middle class professions shot up phenomenally. The total number of men in professional occupations rose from 200,900 in 1851 to 563,000 in 1891. As a percentage of the working age population it increased significantly from 3.5 to 6.4 over those four decades (Hoppen, 1998).

School fees at a school like St James' would have been high and beyond the means of aspiring working-class parents, no matter how devoutly they had read Samuel Smiles. Boarding school fees were naturally the most expensive, and the fictionalized St James' takes on boarders and day boys, unlike the St Paul's of the time. Another 'Clarendon' school, Harrow, charged a basic annual fee that ranged from £143 to £188 (Searle, 2004), but the actual cost of sending a son off to public school was around £200-300 per year depending on the prestige of the school (Cannadine, 2017). Even for middle-class parents this meant sacrifices and economies, or at least kindly relatives willing to contribute financially to their nephew or grandson's education. One economy was for the family to move to the local town and have their son be a 'day boy' (Searle, 2004). It is wrong to assume that all public school boys were from rich families. As Rubenstein (1986) found, among the pupils of most public schools could be found the offspring of county parsons and retired army or navy officers. Towards the end of Victorian era the sons of professionals predominated: 58% of St Paul's boys had fathers in the professions (Rubenstein, 1993). This is not to suggest inclusivity, only that public

schools like the fictionalised St James' in *Sinister Street* drew their pupils increasingly from the middle class as the nineteenth century progressed, a small but significant section of wider British society.

The recognition of a changing society inspired the push for qualifying examinations and greater professionalization. In 1836 and 1837 the passing of a written exam was required to practice in common-law courts and the chancery court. The British Medical Association was founded in 1858 to oversee the medical profession. In 1858 the College of Surgeons granted a special licence in dentistry. This was part of a move towards more meritocratic entry to a variety of professions, inspired by the desire to replace an aristocracy of birth with an aristocracy of talent (Hoppen, 1998, p. 112). The 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan civil service report replaced patronage with open exams for entry to the higher grades of the civil service, and costly commissions into the Army were fully abolished in 1871. The professions became the surest way to respectability, a much-cherished value to Victorians. And, for many aspiring types, a public school education was the surest way to achieve this goal. At the end of the century four-fifths of St Paul's boys entered the professions (Rubenstein, 1993).

A less respectable profession was journalism in most of its newer incarnations. Tellingly, the critic's son in *Sinister Street* mispronounces his father's occupation, saying his father is a 'cricket' but quickly corrects himself, though he and his audience are still unsure what exactly a critic is (1993, p. 39-40). That the role of critic exists, and that such people could earn enough to pay for their son's education with the necessary economy, reflects the explosion in journalism during the late nineteenth century. The last two decades of Victoria's reign saw the numbers of authors, editors, and journalists rise by 81%. Newspaper circulation doubled between 1896 and 1906, as did the annual publication of books over a much longer period - at mid-century 2600 book titles were published annually compared to 6044 in 1901, spurred in part by the availability of cheap editions (Searle, 2004).

By the close of the nineteenth century the public schools, whether major or minor, were open to a much wider clientele than previously, despite the

growing use of preparatory schools by wealthier sections of society. That such clientele could include more entrepreneurial elements is seen in the episode at prep school when Michael is ridiculed for getting his homework signed by Miss Carthew rather than his parents. The mirth runs from his teacher through the entire class, including Jubb – a 'snub-nosed boy...with a cockney accent' – who asks what his father was. That regional accents were heard at ancient schools was a radical change from earlier decades, and perhaps reflects the march of a grubby 'plutocracy' so derided by contemporaries. After Michael replies to Jubb's question, saying 'He was a gentleman', Avery (Michael's nemesis) overhears and derides him; Michael asks Avery what his father was, who replies in a mix of ridicule and one-upmanship, 'My father's a duke, and I've got an uncle who's a millionaire, and my governess is a queen' (1993, p. 97).

The public schools had a valuable role in assimilating sections of the middle classes, but the process did not happen overnight. Initially those assimilated were drawn from the middle classes closest to the aristocracy and gentry, barristers and physicians at the top of their professions, substantial earners who could negotiate with ease the social graces required of Victorian high society. Later, the provincial industrialists were admitted, trailing the successful admission of people like Sir Robert Peel (educated at Harrow and Oxford, son of a wealthy textile manufacturer,) and William Gladstone (Eton and Oxford, son of a Liverpool merchant). Later still were the aspiring sections of the middle class which are mentioned among Michael's peers: doctors, solicitors, critics, who sent their sons away to new public schools, more minor than major, so they could receive an education befitting a gentleman. All were transfixed by the magic of the public school ethos, the surest way to be considered a gentleman and actually become one. That such schools might include those with regional accents and other 'outsiders' as indicted in *Sinister Street* reflects a changing Britain hurtling towards an urban and industrial future, challenging the traditional form of aristocratic wealth – land. The middle classes were getting richer but also more politically and culturally significant (Newsome, 1961).

The public school ethos encouraged a shared identity and values in fostering a love of and loyalty towards the school as institution, larger than any one individual. This was seen as mirroring the entrustment of leadership of the country, broadly understood, whose institutions were the foundation of continued prosperity. Sharing a school in common meant sharing values – and interests. As Dr Arnold's son Matthew claimed, "It is only in England that this beneficial salutary inter-mixture of classes takes place. Look at the bottle-merchant's son, and the Plantagenet being brought up side by side… Very likely young Bottles will end up being a lord himself" (as cited in Briggs, 1955, p. 153).

Education of gentlemen

The importance of shared values among the higher ranks of society was explicitly acknowledged by the Clarendon report: 'These schools have been the chief nurseries of our statesmen ... and they have had perhaps the largest share in moulding the character of an English Gentleman.' (Young & Handcock, 1955, p. 905).

The moulding of gentlemen undertaken by public schools, or at least what middle-class parents thought they offered, also meant a moulding of a particular political outlook. In the following term Michael with half of the upper fourth moves up to the lower fifth. Avery goes to Charterhouse (to follow the route taken by his father and grandfather before him). Michael finds this a pleasant class and thrives, coming out top in the Christmas exams. Michael reads incessantly at home, books that encouraged side taking. Michael takes a contrary position on what he reads, opting for the Trojans not the Greeks, the Lancastrians not the Yorkists, the Jacobites not the Hanoverians, the Americans not the English. Miss Carthew teases Michael for being "a Roundhead and a Whig, and even hinted that he would grow up a Radical." (1993, p. 97). This suggestion greatly annoys Michael as "at Randell House no boy could be anything but a Conservative without laying himself open to the suggestion that he was not a gentleman." (1993, p. 98). The importance of being considered a gentleman was paramount among public school pupils.

Eccentricity was tolerated if beyond such eccentricity the eccentric was a gentleman. Michael's master, 'Foxy' Braxted, certainly looked the part.

> Mr. Braxted was such a dandy and wore such sharply creased and tight trousers and was so well set up and groomed that the class was proud of his nest appearance and would inform the Upper Third that Foxy Braxted did, at any rate, look a gentleman, a distinction which the Upper Third could scarcely claim for their own form master. (1993, p. 116).

Running through Volume One of *Sinister Street* is the clash between the notion of the public school as a vehicle of gentlemanliness, so cherished by parents of the time, tied up as it was with an older notion of chivalry, and the day-to-day demands of fitting in at school boys faced. Michael's mother returns after a two-year absence and complains that Michael appears "so grubby and inky nowadays" (1993, p. 98). Michael retorts that by being so grubby and inky "no boy could detect in him any inclination to differentiate himself from the mass. At Randell's, where there was one way of thinking and behaving and speaking, it would have been grossly cocky to be brushed and clean" (1993, p. 98). Mother also objects to Michael's language when he uses 'beastly' to describe standing out from the crowd by wearing a suit (1993, p. 98), and Miss Carthew, Michael's benevolent and wise governess, objects to the word 'rotten' Michael uses to describe his sister's friends (1993, p. 99). Later Michael is taken by his mother to see Lord Saxby. Michael's mother is often abroad with Lord Saxby, who after his death in the South African War at the end of Volume One is finally revealed as Michael's father, though as much is hinted at early on in the novel. Lord Saxby, on hearing about Michael's school experience, wonders whether Eton, the traditional and rightful destination of the aristocracy, would not have been a more suited venue for Michael's education: 'By gad, Valerie, he ought to go to Eton, you know'. Michael's mother, knowing of the shame illegitimacy still carried up and down the social scale, Lord or no Lord, replies 'No, no. I'm

quite sure you were right, when you said St James's' (1993, p. 105).

In Lord Saxby's objections, Mackenzie is alluding to the apparent coarseness that seemed to have emerged in the late nineteenth century public school culture. The Clarendon Report of 1864 noted that 'the old roughness of manners' had largely disappeared from the typical public school boy (Young & Handcock, 1955, p. 905). The coarseness Lord Saxby alludes to at St James' was nothing like the lawlessness culture prevalent at the old public schools in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which Arnold and his disciples strived to banish. But Mackenzie suggests that by the close of the century the pious upstanding Arnoldian schoolboys were less prevalent. One example is Michael's swift adaption to life at preparatory school in large part thanks to Rodber immediately recruiting him into one of the two schoolboy 'armies' that maintained a fierce, all-consuming rivalry and continually ambushed each other. The 'grubby and inky' version of Michael that so startles his parents is perhaps indicative of a less scholarly and less pious school culture emerging in the closing decades of the Victorian era. The Arnoldian code, even though it is often caricatured and Arnold believed that schoolboy society was largely impervious to masters' control (Vance, 1975), did during the 1840s and 1850s influence many headmasters, many of which were Arnold's former pupils or colleagues. But ideas of manliness soon morphed from Arnoldian moral earnestness into physical ardour as athleticism occupied more of the public school curriculum (Vance, 1975) as Michael finds after leaving prep school for St James' proper in Book Two. This was something to be thankful for, many believed, as the rough and tumble on the playing field or playground diverted excess energies from more 'unsavoury' pleasure-seeking pursuits among and between schoolboys.

Fitting in

Starting a new school always was and always will be a nerve-racking experience. On a visit to Miss Carthew's family home in the country before starting prep school in the autumn Michael is offered advice from Mrs. Carthew: “Take my advice - never ask questions. Be content to make a fool

of yourself once or twice, but don't ask questions. Don't answer questions either. That's worse than asking." (1993, p. 81). Such advice is given to a naturally inquisitive and bright boy who Mrs. Carthew sees as the type of boy who would ask questions and be among the most eager to answer them. Mrs. Carthew then adds more sage advice on the part public school will occupy over the longer term:

> "I'm glad I'm not going to school for the first time; you won't like it at all at first, and then you'll like it very much indeed, and then you'll either go on liking it very much or you'll hate it. If you go on liking it - I mean when you are quite old - sixteen or seventeen - you'll never do anything, but if you hate it then, you'll have the chance of doing something" (1993, p. 81).

School is school, but to some boys, school is everything, and because of it, they never quite leave it behind as they move into adult life. On his return to London, Rodber, a neighbouring boy who already attends Randell House, offers more pithy advice about survival from a boys' perspective: "Look here, don't tell anyone your Christian name and don't be cocky." (1993, p. 82).

Sinister Street evokes an 1890s childhood extremely well. Before starting preparatory school, Michael is allowed to read the *Boys' Own Paper*, in which stories of public school life and tales of imperial derring-do. Once at school Michael soon adopts the 'general ambitions and factions and prejudices and ideals of schoolboyhood' (1993, p. 88), learns the language of his new community, and joins in the craze for collecting (silkworms, silver paper, stamps, coins, medals, autographs, birds' eggs and shells, fossils and bones, butterflies and moths, pictures of famous cricketers); the craze too for swapping - the Bible of swapping at the time was *The Exchange and Mart*: "All the romance of commerce was to be found in The Exchange and Mart" (1993, p. 102). Michael is among the many devotees of cricket, at the time much more popular than football, although Michael and his friends seem more occupied with the cricket periodicals and averages than actually sitting

through a whole match. Like the child of any class before or since, Michael and his friends enjoy roving around the neighborhood, preying on rivals from different schools. Michael's cohort are the first to enjoy cycling, opening up unheard-of vistas of roaming out of reach of previous generations of schoolboys. Michael also makes his first close friend, only for the friendship to be shattered in discovering the friend supported Oxford not Cambridge in the upcoming boat race.

Groupings at St James' are important, particularly those that separated day boys from boarders. When Miss Carthew falls seriously ill, Michael becomes a temporary boarder bringing with it a huge change in status. An 'icy river of prejudice' had separated boarders from day boys at his preparatory school (1993, p. 142), but even at St James' boarders were barred from close friendships with day boys and could no longer partake in the ritual of an after-school walk home unless they formed a large amorphous mass. Michael feels a pang of jealous in seeing his best friend Alan walk out of the school gates arm in arm with a new friend. Rules abound, both emanating from the school itself and what Michael refers to as the Lords of House (the prefects). Saturday afternoon tea at friends' homes needed a release from the Housemaster and captain of the House. Michael spends a dissolute Christmas confined to 'empty barracks' (1993, p. 143), and a summer term fetching cricket balls during the House prefects' nets practice. Yet the worst thing about being a boarder for Michael was that 'A boarder was tied down mercilessly to athletics, particularly to rowing, which was the pride of the Houses and was exalted by them above every other branch of sport." (1993, p. 142).

Sport and militarism

Book Two – Classic Education - opens with Michael watching the St James's First Fifteen match Michael dreams: 'Why should not he, six or seven years hence, penetrate the serried forces of Dulford and score the winning try, even as the referee's whistle was lifted to sound 'time'? Ambition woke in Michael, while he surveyed upon that muddy field the prostrate forms of the fifteen, like statues in a museum' (1993, p. 118). After this first

chapter the reader naturally expects subsequent chapters to be devoted to the merits of Muscular Christianity and the games mania sweeping schools through the second half of the nineteenth century. This is far from the case. Michael has an ambivalent relationship with sport and his sporting peers. Mackenzie articulates the worship of playing field prowess but also an awareness of such adulation as slavish and misplaced, particularly in those boys whose abilities are more academic than sporting.

As Mangan (1975) has repeated stressed, sport at public school was not just sport but a means of inculcating particular values like loyalty, team work, unselfishness, and physical and moral courage. Sport provided a means to hive off excess energies and ward off indiscipline and rebelliousness, but more importantly it built character, character that a boy would need as a bulwark for all that was thrown at him in adult life. *Sinister Street* takes place at a time of imperial expansion and competition. As the Empire expand, so too did the need to populate and administer it. With competition for Oxbridge and suitable employment at home increasing, those unable to find positions at home, and equipped with, thanks to their public school education and the physical and moral backbone forged on muddy playing fields, the prerequisite stiff upper lips that rarely quivered, old boys staffed the colonies as administrators, doctors, missionaries, and military officers, far away from matron or mother.

After displaying the prerequisite physical and moral courage on the rugby field Michael and Alan are considered 'lords of Little Side [rugby] football' which meant adulation from the 'underlings' who they treat with disdain, though they are 'duly grateful for so much acknowledgment of their existence from these stripling gods' (1993, p. 154). Here is an early inkling that what distinguishes boys, in their eyes, is sporting prowess, one is either good or bad at games, and the accompanying status dependent on how one is placed. Michael and Alan saunter to class to doze and yawn off their rugby exploits, or push passed the juniors in the crowd when the First Fifteen are playing. The summer term brings cricket, with Michael and Alan captaining and vice-captaining the Classical Upper Fourth Second Eleven, more eager

for the glory of leadership than virtual anonymity well down the batting order in the First Eleven. Sauntering around school as sporting notables and swaggering around the neighborhood at weekends comes at a cost: the end of term exams sees them near the bottom of the class, 'a contemptible position for a Scholar' as the headmaster underlines (1993, p. 163). Later Michael grows increasingly disillusioned with school, dabbles with Catholicism and aesthetic decadence, drowns himself in Walter Swinburne poetry, and pines for the lost innocence of friendship, his relationship with Alan have gradually cooled off. Alan, in a different class by now, is chasing school colours in cricket, while Michael has grown indifferent to playing sport. But a new term sees Michael deciding to resurrect his rugby career after two years of inactivity. He scores six tries in his comeback game, earning him a place in the Classical First Fifteen alongside Alan against the loathed Moderns First Fifteen.

> Now the game swayed desperately, and with Alan beside him Michael lived through every heroic fight of man. They were at Thermopylae, stemming the Persian charges with hack and thrust and sweeping cut; they were at Platea with Aristides and Pausanias, vowing death rather than subjugation; the body of Terry beneath the weight of Modern forwards, crying 'Let me up, you stinkers!' was fought for as long ago beneath the walls of Troy the battle raged about the body of Patroclus. (1993, p. 247)

Mackenzie was not the first to see a parallel between the sporting field and the battlefield. Michael is playing for the 'Classics' against the 'Moderns' team and as a gifted classicist is apt to draw an analogy between his team's heroic battle and more illustrious battles in ancient history. Yet the late nineteenth century games cult that emerged at public schools was infused with a martial spirit. The physical demands of sport had obvious parallels with the demands of soldiering, but also sport was viewed by many as a means of inculcating team work and a coming together in pursuit of common goals.

Common purpose meant common obligations, to team mates, House, and school. Loyalty and duty on the playing field could quite naturally translate to loyalty and duty on the battlefield. When St James' reconvenes after Christmas 1899, many of Michael's contemporaries were missing having enlisted to fight the Boers in southern Africa. Mackenzie describes the pride the school felt as news of the fallen swept the school: 'Old Jacobeans died bravely, and their deaths were recorded in the school magazine; one Old Jacobean gained the Victoria Cross; everyone walked from prayers very proudly upon that day' (1993, 250). By this time, Britain had sent 180,000 men off to the war, the largest army ever sent overseas (Heffer, 2017). A small, short war it was not. In the next war, St Paul's, the authentic St James', contributed 2917 current or former students to the war effort; 490 of those were killed (Seldon & Walsh, 2015).

Sport, coupled with the growth of cadet and rifle corps, would ensure the country had a worthy pool of potential and actual officers to draw on in the event of future conflicts, and by 1914 this had happened. The games cult is easy to portray as promoting some sort of death cult, that those who learned to play the game also learned the value of a death on the battlefield upholding the honour of nation – and, judging by letters home from the front, being a credit to the school (Best, 1975). Churchill, war at Harrow and on the North West frontier seemed more like a bloodier version of a school game (Best, 1975), an early acknowledgement that sport was really 'war minus the shooting' as the old Etonian George Orwell put it. When the Dulwich College rugby team played their supporters sang 'Fifteen fellows fighting full, Out for death or glory' (Best, 1975). A premature death loomed much larger in the public school boy mind at the turn of the century than it does in more recent times. Victoria's wars were overwhelmingly small but were reasonably regular given the demands of expanding an empire. Life in the colonies, whether as a redcoat or not, risked an early demise through disease or native uprising. Perhaps reverting to the language of sport helped them make sense of it, and, in the spirit of honour upheld and sacrifices made, instill it with nobility, a nobility that ordinary life distinctly lacked.

What is interesting about Mackenzie's treatment of the 'khaki fever' sweeping the nation during the Boer War is Michael's ambivalence towards it. Michael's early obsession with British army regiments and his friendship with an old major in Eastbourne, suggested he was destined for an army life. Yet even though he was caught up in the patriotic mood amid the 500,000 strong crowd at Southampton when seeing off Captain Ross and the 1st Army Corps, as the war turned in Britain's favour and his peers start sporting khaki ties and buttons of General Roberts face, and news of Captain Ross' death is reported in the newspaper, Michael rages at the war, at Britain's motives, and the popular 'circus' of the home front that has engulfed his school (1993, p. 252). Later, when walking through West Kensington with Alan, Michael appreciates the beauty and value of the 'sunlit security' of the neighborhood, reflecting that the 'khaki fever' of his peers should be forgiven:

> ...he arrived gradually at a sort of compassion for them, picturing the lives of small effort that would inevitably be their portion. He perceived that they would bear the burden of existence in the future, struggling to preserve their gentility against the envy of the class beneath them and the contempt of those above. These gay little houses, half of whose charm lay in their similarity, were as near as they would ever come to any paradise of being. Michael had experienced many spasms of love for his fellow men, and now in one of these outbursts he suddenly realized himself in sympathy with mediocrity (1993, p. 267).

One such mediocrity uncovered by the Boer War was the dearth of professional competence that gallantry and sheer bravery had masked. One strand of the push for 'National Efficiency' that emerged after the pyrrhic victory in southern Africa was the belief that the public schools had focused too much on character training to the detriment of more practical scientific training. One contemporary observer was clear in his condemnation: 'More officers of the studious type are needed' yet 'the right type cannot be got

from the public schools' (Maclean, 1903). Many began to realise that even though the aristocracy of birth corporated substantial numbers of the middle classes into a more talent-based aristocracy, the new elite was not modern enough. Germany, so often feared and admired during this period, had an elite that was more technical and scientifically knowledgeable, subjects that the public schools begrudgingly incorporated into the curriculum and treated as inferior to the character-building merits of Classics. By 1915 it was obvious that the Germans had the better trenches, even though the British had dug them on the Velt under scorching suns back in 1900.

Curriculum

Sinister Street gives a strong sense of the different status attributed to so called 'modern' subjects vis-à-vis more traditional subjects in the late nineteenth century public school. Boys, ever eager to notice and prey on difference, sense this distinction. In one episode soon after entering St James', Michael and Alan, freshly ennobled by their classmates as class rebels and pranksters, deign to swagger past the Modern class lined up outside their classroom. Scuffles break out to the sound of 'You stinking Modern beasts! Classics to the rescue!', which triggers a surge of classmates into the fray.

> "Down went the Modern textbooks of Chemistry and Physics and ignominiously were they hacked along the corridor. Doubled up by a swinging blow from a bag stood the leader of the Moderns, grunting and gasping in his windless agony. Back to the serenity of Virgilian airs went the Upper Fourth A, with Michael and Alan arm in arm amid their escort, and most dejectedly did the Modern cads gather up their scientific textbooks" (1993, p. 153-4)

Textbook readers were clearly no match for those familiar with Virgilian verse, in the original Latin. As Michael later declares, 'At St James' the Modern fellows are nearly always bounders.' (1993, p. 198). This view might well have been shared among many masters too; a liberal education was what

best nourished boys, science contributed little in forming a boy's character. Mathematics, too, occupied an inferior position in the public school curriculum, with mathematics class composition often determined by how able a boy was in classics (Meadows & Brock, 1975). If Mackenzie is to be believed, the view of mathematics was enshrined by tradition that even mathematics teachers acquiesced to: At St James' School "Tradition forbade any member of the History Sixth to take Mathematics seriously, and Mr. Gaskell, the overworked Mathematics master, was not inclined to break this tradition." (1993, p. 227). That he was overworked need not imply that mathematics was popular; he may have been the only mathematics master at the entire school, implying that the teaching of mathematics was not deemed a priority.

The low view of science and mathematics existing at St James' is curious, as gradually from the 1860s mathematics gained a reputation as an important ancillary subject, that served to drag science up in many schools' estimation from an admittedly lowly estimation. The Clarendon Commission recognized the neglect of science was 'a plain defect and a great practical evil' (Young & Handcock, 1955, p. 902). The public school curriculum was too narrow and failed to cater for students with a natural aptitude and appetite for more practical subjects, whether mathematics, science, or increasingly as the century progressed, modern languages (Meadows & Brock, 1975). What the Clarendon Commission said of the neglect of science can quite easily extend to other such practical subjects: 'It narrows unduly and injuriously the mental training of the young, and the knowledge, interests, and pursuits of men in mature life' (Young & Handcock, 1955, p. 902). After being noticed as one of the school's high flyers, Michael forgoes cricket practice and studies hard for the Oxford and Cambridge Higher Certificate. Passes Greek and Latin, French and divinity, Roman history, Algebra and Euclid, but fails mathematics. In his mind it was 'the arithmetical problems of a Stockbroker, a Paper-hanger, and a Housewife' that prevented him from joining the select tribe basking in the prestige of passing the Oxford and Cambridge Higher Certificate. His inadequacy in mathematics 'made all the rest of his knowledge of no account' (1993, p. 185). The recognition at Oxbridge of the value of

mathematics (and later science) spread to the public schools, yet judging by Michael's experience a hierarchy of subjects prevailed even at the end of the century.

Michael is easily disheartened by his failure in the Oxford and Cambridge Higher Certificate. This mirrors Mackenzie's own experience. Compton resented being seen as a vehicle to maintain the St Paul's prestige in the push for Oxbridge scholarships (which came out top among the nine ancient schools). Instead of taking up the challenge of pursuing a scholarship, Mackenzie switched from classics to the still relatively new academic discipline of modern history, just as his fictional alto ego does. Mackenzie's headmaster was not amused: 'You have been the greatest disappointment to me of any boy who has passed through my hands ... you have flung it all away to swagger up and down the corridors of this school with the manners and appearance of a deboshed clerk' (Mackenzie, 1963, p. 242). Such sentiments are echoed by the headmaster of St James' when Michael transfers from Classics to Moderns in search of the more languid demands of studying modern history.

Michael's switch to modern history illuminates the modernizing of the public school curriculum, which was more begrudging than evangelical, and never really complete until well into the twentieth century, although some would contend it remains incomplete even now. What made the appreciation of mathematics and science so lukewarm in many quarters through the second half of the nineteenth century was the belief that such subjects could never humanize, a belief directly expressed in the Clarendon Report of 1864.

That Michael fails to keep up with his headmaster's estimation of him as an academic high flyer, suggests that even with the traditional focus on character, schools were increasingly concerned with their standing vis-à-vis other schools. The creeping utilitarian view of education, in the importance St James' gives to the pursuit of Oxbridge scholarships, Michael 'vaguely apprehended a loss of a soul' (1993, p. 128).

The world outside the school gates was undoubtedly changing. When one summer as Michael stays at an Anglican monastery on Berkshire Downs he

meets Garrod from Hornsey, and the coming world is exposed to him in all its democratic and scientifically shaped glory: 'Science is all the go nowadays,' declares Garrod. 'And Science is what we want.' Michael admits his hatred of science but accepts that doctors are necessary. Without a knowledge of science, Garrod maintains, 'you aren't properly educated.'

'I'm at a public school,' said Michael proudly.

'Yes, and public schools have got to go very soon.'

'Who says so?' Demanded Michael fiercely.

'We say so. The people.'

'The people,' echoed Michael. 'What people? Why, if public schools were done away with we shouldn't have any gentlemen.' (1993, p. 198). Michael finds this exchange and Garrod's brazen self-confidence deeply unsettling, 'The vision of a world populated by hostile Garrods rose up, and some of the simplicity of life vanished irredeemably'. (1993, p. 199).

After the extension of the franchise in 1885, a world populated by such people was a step closer, something that was both celebrated and feared in equal measure. Garrod was broadly right in his analysis, though he was wrong that public schools would be swept away by the democratic winds. If anything, British public schools have never been more popular, with parents from all over the democratic and non-democratic world. And it is not just because of Harry Potter.

Quite early on in Michael's career at St James', before flirting with Catholicism, aesthetic decadence, and the blue-eyed Lily, Michael's is overwhelmed with pride in the historical staying power of his school through so much of English history. He stumbles across a picture of St Mary's College, Oxford, and commits himself to joining its ranks. As Britain hurtles into an uncertain future, Michael appreciates the value of timelessness. He is enjoying school life.

> Summer suns shone down upon the green playground of St James' rippling with flannelled forms. The radiant air was filled with merry cries, with the sounds of bat and ball, with boyhood in action. In the great red

mass of the school buildings the golden clock moved on through each day's breathless hour of cricket. The Junior Shield was won by the Shell, and the proud victors, after a desperate argument with Mr. Neech, actually persuaded him to take his place in the commemorative photograph. School broke up and the summer holidays began (1993, p. 129).

Conclusion

Sinister Street captures well life at a public school at the end of the Victorian era. The reader gets a sense of march of an expanding middle class into the schools, the persistence of the gentlemanly ethos in framing pupils' and parents' belief in this form of education, the role of games as school hero-makers and as character-formers, and the friction between classics and modern subjects in the curriculum and among the boys themselves. It also illuminates vividly the close of nineteenth century, as events in the wider world impinge on the school and the lives of those within its walls. Democracy and technocracy are gaining pace, a period more anxious and aggrieved than is commonly thought. In being firmly autobiographical, *Sinister Street* is a useful means of understanding the historical continuity and change that public schools underwent at the close of the nineteenth century. It deserves greater recognition within the list of public school novels.

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