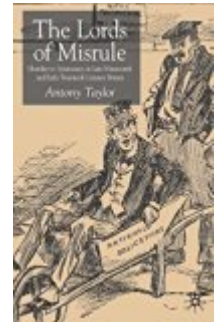


Antony Taylor. *Lords of Misrule: Hostility to Aristocracy in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Britain.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 233 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4039-3221-1.



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Published on H-Albion (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

In *Lords of Misrule*, Antony Taylor attempts to demonstrate that antiaristocratic sentiments and activity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain were more prominent and less marginal than previous generations of historians have attested. He argues that such sentiments were not, as previously believed, irrelevant to the evolution of progressive politics, and that, indeed, they helped forge common ground between the Liberal Party and the emergent Labour Party. Reviewing the growing historiography of the pivotal role the aristocracy played in British political, social, economic, and cultural life during this period, and having cited how, ironically, the most influential historical critique in recent decades of upper-class failings, Martin Wiener's *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (1981), gave ammunition to a Thatcherite project to radically transform British society, the author rightly observes, "Far less attention, however, has been devoted to plebeian readings of the aristocracy. Most studies of aristocracy are rooted in the verdicts of their peers, rather than in the

opinions of those from below" (p. 10). In this work, Taylor hopes to rectify this.

Does he succeed in this laudable endeavor? Generally, yes, though with qualifications. The book is composed of five thematically based chapters, covering "Aristocratic Debauchery and Working-Class Virtue," "'The Apostle of Plunder': The Influence of Henry George in England Reconsidered," "Hunting, Moral Outrage, and Radical Opposition to Animal Abuse in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Britain," "'Lords of Misrule': Liberalism, the House of Lords and the Campaign against Privilege, 1870-1911," and "Plutocracy." Drawing on scholarship in the field of continuities studies, Taylor reveals a significant "demi-world of anti-aristocratic sentiment" that had a long lineage, with its origins in the struggles against enclosures and the despoliation of common land in the early modern era, continuing through the Puritan Commonwealth, and then onto William Cobbett's denunciations of landed wealth, the Chartist

movement, and the conflicts over the various reform bills (p. 10).

I found the most compelling, revelatory, and persuasive chapters to be those on the opposition to hunting and on plutocracy. Concerning the first topic, Taylor gives a fascinating account of how radical commentators conflated a nascent concern with animal rights with disgust at how the aristocracy, jaded through ennui and dissipation, and having lost their original *raison d'être* as professional warriors, inflicted sanguinary slaughter of defenseless beasts. These concerns were linked to historical grievances concerning the loss of commoners' traditional access to the land through aristocratic expropriations--shades here of Robin Hood poaching the king's deer in Sherwood Forest. Taylor evokes well the revulsion engendered by the mass cullings of game, a process made possible by the introduction of fast, breech-loading shotguns from France that enabled "a more industrial process of shooting" (p. 77). In 1868, one aristocratic shooting party alone bagged 8,345 head of game over five days. He later details how the later aping of these activities by *nouveau riche* *parvenus* further repelled observers.

Taylor's discussion on the perceived decline of the aristocracy in the interwar years and the concomitant rise of a plutocracy whose wealth derived from industry, banking, and newspaper proprietorship is particularly nuanced. He delineates a complex discourse, deriving from both the Left and the Right, lamenting the rise of vulgar "new money." As he observes, however, for many on the Left the aristocracy was by no means a spent force, and was indeed surviving through having forged an unholy alliance with the new plutocracy. Taylor goes further, and gives a fascinating and provocative account of how certain coterie within the upper classes flirted with Fascism, seeing in it a solution to the perceived threats to their position and status. On another tack, I was amused by Taylor's assertion that J. F. Kennedy's promiscuous sojourn in his White House Camelot

had been inspired by what he had seen in 1930s London of a "ruling and imperial caste disporting themselves in a social world of empty and predatory sexual conquests" (p. 136).

The other chapters are somewhat drier, although Taylor's arguments are often trenchantly made. His reevaluation of the impact of the American Henry George on British political thought is particularly persuasive in its avowed intent of illustrating how George was central to the popular radicalism of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The chapter on "Liberalism, the House of Lords and the Campaign against Privilege, 1870-1911" is somewhat muddled, and lacking an easily identifiable thesis, although Taylor is clearly with those who argue that the early Labour Party was indebted to Liberalism, including a far greater commitment to reforming the constitution than has previously been thought.

The weakest chapter is the one on "Aristocratic Debauchery and Working-Class Virtue." On occasions it reads like a rhetorical history, overburdened with strident and fiery quotations denouncing the perfidy of the upper classes, mostly drawn from the radical press, particularly *Reynolds's Newspaper*. Taylor though fails to provide the general reader with any estimates of the readership of this and similar periodicals, or on their broader influence in society, and the frequent reiteration of such bombastic declamations does begin to pall after a while. It would have been better to have consigned many of these quotations to citations in footnotes and, perhaps, instead to have explored the marked prevalence of antiaristocratic sentiments in popular culture, particularly the early music hall and the "penny dreadfuls," something that the author only makes the briefest of allusions to.

Another minor caveat I have is that for the nonspecialist reader there could have been more of a clear summation in the opening chapter of who actually the aristocracy were, their numbers, the extent of their lands, their total wealth, and so

on. Furthermore, in his discussions of the attempts by the aristocracy to reinvent itself I was disappointed that Taylor neglected to mention Mark Girouard's illuminating *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (1981).

Taylor concludes with a number of apposite remarks on how the aristocracy is perceived in contemporary Britain--how, on the one hand, it has successfully reconfigured itself, lacquering itself with a patina of nostalgia that allows it to be portrayed as a custodian of the past and of the countryside, and yet how, on the other hand, echoes of the old hostility live on in tabloid revelations of the peccadilloes of upper-class aristos and "Sloanes." Fortunately, at least from this reader's perspective, at least one "time-honoured" bastion of the aristocracy, fox hunting, has been consigned to the dustbin of history.

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Citation: David Lloyd Smith. Review of Taylor, Antony. *Lords of Misrule: Hostility to Aristocracy in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Britain*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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