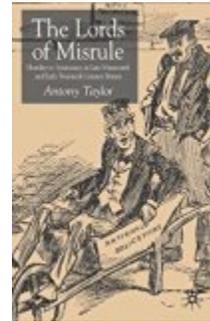


Antony Taylor. *Lords of Misrule: Hostility to Aristocracy in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Britain.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 233 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-3221-1.

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The Deference of the English or the Power of the Aristocracy?

For the past forty years, the historiography of the aristocracy and gentry in modern Britain has been dominated by a series of detailed revisionist interpretations. Scholars such as F. M. L. Thompson and David Cannadine have refuted the notion that the wealthy landed classes suffered a precipitous and rapid decline during the early and mid-nineteenth century as a result of urbanization, industrialization and a “rise of the middle classes.” A central objective of these studies has been to explain how a group whose elite position in society was facilitated by birthright, title and the ownership of land managed to survive in such a rapidly modernizing society. Historians have generally emphasized the flexibility of the aristocracy in adapting to change and the relative openness of elite society to new wealth. They have also focused on the continuity and persistence of popular deference and respect for hierarchy and landownership on the part of the general population. A particular emphasis has been laid on the lack of any significant revolutionary challenge from the “rising middle classes” or from the “respectable working classes” due to the way they were co-opted into traditional forms of lifestyle, mentality and values.

Antony Taylor’s contribution to the history of the modern aristocracy deals with a crucial aspect of this general historical problem: radical opposition to aristocracy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing mainly on published articles and books written by radicals, such as W. M. Reynolds and Henry George, Taylor explores the nature and extent of political discourse on the function and utility of aristocratic

landownership and rule. The book is highly readable and is serviced by clear and concise introductory and concluding sections. The main body is composed of five essays dealing with moral leadership, landownership and land utopianism, hunting and animal rights, the House of Lords and the development of plutocracy during the interwar years.

The main argument of the book is that there was a significant and sustained level of radical criticism directed at the moral, social, economic and political basis of the British aristocracy’s power between the 1870s and the Second World War. There were a number of high profile scandals, such as the sexual assault case involving Colonel Valentine Baker, discussed in chapter 1, that often served as fodder for such attacks. Although they drew on modes of opposition deriving from the eighteenth century and were operating within a relatively traditional social hierarchy, radical attacks in this period were a “totem of modernity.” Radical opposition was closely related to the political attacks of David Lloyd George and the New Liberals on the aristocracy, and formed one of the foci for political activity amongst the early leaders of the Labour Party movement.

A number of the essays take the form of case studies. The focus of chapter 3 is on hunting. Taylor argues that radical attacks on field sports were “emblematic” of wider forms of opposition to landed privilege. Hunting was perceived to be a reflection of aristocratic cruelty and despotism. Field sports were linked to the landowner’s

disregard for the welfare of his dependent tenants. In contrast, republicanism and democracy were associated with the humane treatment of animals. Equally, radicals attacked the way hunting was a non-productive use of agricultural land. There are some particularly interesting sections here on the involvement of aristocratic women as hunt protestors and on the use of the notion of masculinity as a polemical weapon for both the hunters and radicals. As this example shows, many of the subjects Taylor covers will have a strong resonance with several contemporary political debates.

Lords of Misrule makes a number of significant contributions to historical knowledge. It provides new insights into the relationship between the aristocracy and “the people” in this period. There has been a tendency in the past for historians to either focus on the perceptions of landowners or to abstract public perceptions of aristocracy from popular activities, such as country-house visiting. Taylor adds a new dimension to the debate by tapping into contemporary political and media discourse on a detailed and significant level. More specifically, Taylor’s work provides an interesting caveat to the general view that the British public, which was becoming more closely involved in politics and the political process during this period, remained deferent, respectful and conservative during a period in which traditional forms of authority were being weakened and more radical levels of change may have been achieved.

At points, Taylor covers familiar ground in this area. The material on Lloyd George and the Liberals has been covered by David Cannadine in his major contribution on the British aristocracy. There is some level of misin-

terpretation of the secondary material. Taylor tends to overemphasize the stress laid, by historians of the aristocracy, on the continuity and potency of landed power into the late nineteenth century. There are also large portions of landed society missing from Taylor’s work. The study ignores the landed gentry, who formed the bulk of the landed classes, as well as the less wealthy aristocracy who may not have led the kind of high-profile metropolitan lifestyles that would have attracted the specific attention of the public and the media, radical or otherwise.

There are some important questions left unanswered in this contribution. If there was such a vigorous and sustained level of opposition to aristocracy in modern Britain, how did wealthy landed families survive and why was the social revolution in Britain of a partial nature? Taylor is clearly aware of this issue and supplies a possible answer. When commenting on coverage of the Valentine case, in chapter 1, he states that “radicalism presented the perverse paradox of a culture of anti-aristocracy that produced the most avid watchers of high society” (p. 31). Indeed, many of the criticisms discussed in the text were attempts to curb the excesses of aristocratic behavior, rather than undermine the fundamental basis of their power and authority. In this sense, Taylor’s book produces more questions than it answers.

However, a single study of such restricted length cannot be expected to provide definitive answers to such complex questions. *The Lords of Misrule* will be a very positive contribution to a comparatively under-researched area and will form an important and accessible resource for historians and students alike.

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