

# **‘Decline through Survival: The Lives of the Younger Sons of the English Landed Gentry, c. 1700-1900’**

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## **Introduction**

In many respects, the English ‘Gentry’ are an anomaly among European noble elites. Although they shared a similar life-style with the titled aristocracy, based on landed property, leisure, political and cultural patronage, they were ‘commoners’ rather than ‘nobles’. Under the system of strict ‘primogeniture’ aristocratic titles in Britain passed to eldest sons, and no groups of impoverished ‘cadet’ nobles emerged. The arrangements amongst English landowners ensured that *as a group* the British nobility and gentry remained remarkably prosperous and powerful until the 1870s. However, the perpetuation of the power of the gentry as a group between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries came at the price of social alienation for many individuals within the group. In order for primogeniture to operate, and the integrity of the family estate to be preserved, younger children (particularly sons) were excluded from significant inheritance, and required to earn their own livings. For the titled aristocracy, resources were usually sufficient to support younger children without the necessity of them having to work. For the gentry, though, younger sons were forced to enter the military, mercantile or retail businesses, professions such as law or medicine, and the emergent colonial administration systems. This, we believe, was a distinctive pattern from much of the rest of Western Europe. Whilst primogeniture certainly occurred in many regions, it was less strictly adhered to, more variable patterns of inheritance existed and the entrance of younger sons into trade was less readily accepted than it was in England. Thus the gentry, the backbone of English rural elites were an unusual group in the wider European community of landowners.

While undertaking non-landed occupations did not challenge their legal status, it forced younger sons into more regular and sustained contact with other social and ethnic groups. As they did so, they had to confront two aspects of their social identity identified by British sociologist Richard Jenkins. By confronting other social identities, values and behavioural codes, they had to consider the values that contributed to their *external classification* – that is, the status indicators that were seen by others, which included elements such as accent, gesture, dress, manners, education, cultural capital and social connections, the things they had achieved by the time they reached adulthood. At the same time, exposure to behavioural ‘others’ also forced them to consider their own *internal identification* – that is, the values, behavioural codes and social groups with which they identified in relation to ‘others’, their gentry background and upbringing in other words.

Due to the nature of younger sons’ lives such recognition was often accompanied by a painful process of social recognition and adjustment. These younger sons had been sheltered within an elite identity, perpetuated through family, schools and universities. The necessity to earn a living often removed them permanently from their previous social milieu, and embedded them within much more heterogeneous metropolitan, military or colonial settler societies. In many cases, they found that their previous identity could not be supported, because they no longer had access to the family connections, social infrastructure and dynastic reputations that supported their identity at home. This could be a profoundly

alienating and disruptive experience that some younger sons never overcame, and sometimes created hybrid and unresolved social and gender identities.

**(Slide)** The paper will explore these various processes and issues in two ways. We begin with a statistical survey of patterns of birth, education, occupation and marriage based on a sample of 183 gentry families resident in the counties of Devon, Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire and Lancashire. This is a small but representative sample in terms of region, levels of wealth and status. Because this project is in the early stages we have yet to produce the data on the earlier period and the data we present covers 1800 and 1939. For the purposes of this paper we will rely on T. H. Hollingsworth's data for the earlier period. We should also note that the Lancashire families play a cameo role in this data at this point, only appearing in the fertility statistics. Secondly we examine the experiences of gentry sons by taking examples from the correspondence of 19 English Gentry families between 1700 and 1900. The personal sources were derived from a three-year study, which examined over 4,000 personal letters, plus diaries and other personal documents. We will examine the experiences of younger sons in some of the areas outlined above (military, urban retail trades and overseas endeavours in business and colonial administration), to consider these questions of identity.

In doing so, it will do two main things. Firstly we will illustrate the hidden personal costs to the experiences and identities of younger sons that supported the long-term status and success of the 'lesser nobility' in Britain in this period. We particularly emphasise a previously unexplored aspect of these costs; the impact on the masculine status and identity of younger sons, the way that their particular experience of identity formation impinged on their social and psychological well-being. Secondly, on the basis of our reading of that material we suggest that whilst the power and wealth of the gentry as a whole persisted until the late nineteenth century younger sons continued to suffer the personal costs as part of the survival strategy of the gentry. We detect little change in the nature of the experiences of younger sons. As the power of the gentry declined, however, the position of younger sons, or at least their perception of their position, improved and it was their elder brothers, those who inherited the estates, who expressed the anguish and anxiety associated with burdensome responsibilities to the family patrimony. Thus the qualitative relationship between the individual and the group shifted in focus. To set these experiences in a broader context we begin with a brief outline of the structure of the life-course of younger sons, their numbers, their education, their occupations and their family lives in terms of marriage and fatherhood.

## I.

We should start with a working definition of who the landed gentry were since, although some were titled, they cannot be identified merely by honorary titles alone. In terms of landed wealth there has been a general agreement that the minimum income from estates was around £300 in the eighteenth century, rising to £1000 in the Victorian period. There was no upper ceiling on these levels and some families owned far more land. So the observation by F. M. L. Thompson that the gentry '...came in a bewildering variety of shapes and sizes' is a truism that we should acknowledge. This diverse group included families with highly variable levels of spending power, not least in terms of their ability to provide for younger sons and daughters. However, whatever their level above the minimum requirement all these incomes from 'passive' investments allowed for a leisurely lifestyle and for public service as members of parliament, magistrates, commissioners of the peace and so on. Such incomes also allowed

time, land and income for rural pursuits such as hunting and shooting. The privilege of leisure was, of course, at least partly off-limits to the workaday younger son, an issue that we focus on in this paper.

Beginning with numbers, in total there were five hundred and seventy five marriages of estate owners amongst our larger sample between 1800 and 1919. These marriages produced 1167 daughters and 1394 sons. Of those sons 891 were younger sons. **(Slide)** The first point to note here is that these numbers were not evenly distributed across the later period due to a prolonged and permanent decline in the fertility of the landed gentry. Average numbers of children declined from just under six in 1800 to 2.23 by 1900. This was a significant long-term departure from earlier demographic patterns amongst landowners who generally, apart from short term fertility declines, had large families. Put simply into the second half of our period there was a decline in the number of younger gentry sons that gentry families had to support as the slide shows. This was off-set to some extent by gradual improvements in mortality rates, by the buoyant numbers of daughters born as the fertility decline proceeded, and of course, by the general decline in gentry incomes from the later nineteenth century onwards. Other patterns though reflect equally positive outlooks.

**(Slide)** As this slide shows, across the nineteenth century younger sons were at a disadvantage in comparison to their elder brothers in terms of the provision of education. However, large and growing proportions of them did attend these elite institutions. Though education was an important form of social and cultural capital for younger sons we suggest that the shortfall between them and their elder brothers was partly due to the number of younger sons that entered occupations without the necessity for further schooling. As patterns of occupational destination changed, however, increasing numbers did continue their education. Whilst the numbers of younger sons entering the army increased into the nineteenth century, fewer of them went into trade and the apprenticeship system for the gentry became far less attractive as well. Increasing numbers instead entered the gentlemanly professions and the civil and colonial services. We suggest then that increasing numbers were educated at public schools and universities in the nineteenth century because their occupational destinations required this training. We also note at this point that quite significant numbers of younger sons, around twenty-five percent, did inherit the family estates due to the early death or infertility of their eldest brothers.

Finally in terms of marriage we have found buoyant rates in the nineteenth century. We found that a mere 11 per cent of those younger sons who could have married (lived to 50) were lifelong bachelors. This compares favourably with their sisters and with the British population as a whole, according to the research of Wrigley and Schofield. It also appears to be an improvement on earlier chances of marriage amongst the male scions of the peerage. T. H. Hollingsworth found that non-marriage amongst landed males who reached the age of 50 had declined from 25 per cent in 1700 to 20 per cent in 1800. These changes continued into the nineteenth century so that, by 1900 only thirteen per cent of males of the peerage remained unmarried at this age. Hollingsworth's explanation for this improvement was that into the nineteenth century the social range of acceptable marriage partners was widening in this period, allowing for higher rates of marriage. We have yet to test this with an analysis of the social types that gentry younger sons were marrying but there is an intriguing proposition here that a breakdown in the exclusivity of the landed classes improved the life chances of younger sons.

Overall then the pattern of younger sons' lives exhibit a mixed picture. They were disadvantaged in comparison to their elder brothers but in some ways, particularly in

marriage, their life chances improved across the period. This of course did not mean that the experience of all younger sons was positive or untroubled, there is a marked difference between structural patterns observed from a historical distance and the experience of lives led day-to-day on the ground, as the following section that Henry will deliver makes clear.

## II.

**(Slide)** Identity formation is a very complex process. The British sociologist Richard Jenkins has provided a formulation that provides some analytical clarity to inform our understandings of it. Jenkins posits a ‘unified model’ of identity formation that works similarly at the level of the individual, the social (in face-to-face interaction between individuals) and the societal (in the formation of collective, impersonal identities). At all three levels he suggests that identity is formed by a constant ‘dialectic’ between internal and external perspectives. For the individual it is in the difference between the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ self – between ‘I’ and ‘me’. Younger gentry sons, as we have noted earlier, experiences contradictions and conflicts between these internal and external identities, between their inherited identities as gentry sons and the outcomes of their life chances and social existence as *younger sons* bereft of much of the status held by their elder brothers, their external identities. Importantly, Jenkins also observed that ‘identities do not just exist “in the mind” or “on paper”’. They are also subjective experiences that shape future life-chances. The categories of identity themselves then become ‘real’, because they form the basis for decisions about the allocation of resources or penalties for others in society – as in the subsequent social responses to ‘eldest’ and ‘younger’ sons. In these ways, these identities or categories embody distributions of authority in society, and acquire social meaning as the result of rhetorical contests about these distributions.

**(Slide)** The most systematic survey of the ‘younger son’ as an external classification, in the form of literary stereotypes, remains the late Joan Thirsk’s 1969 article, ‘Younger Sons in the Seventeenth Century’. Reviewing literary depictions of younger sons, Thirsk observes that:

... to describe anyone as ‘*a younger son*’ was a short-hand way of summing up a host of grievances... so *younger son* meant an angry young man, bearing more than his share of injustice and resentment.

Such observations based on representations are supported in the personal comments and thoughts of younger sons as recorded in their family correspondence.

Both parents and sons recognised that it was the duty of parents and seniors (guardians or inheriting elder brothers) to find an occupation or profession that offered the best long-term prospects of maintaining a lifestyle that maintained the credit of the individual and his family. In 1813 Edward Parker asked his father in relation to Robert’s even more wayward youngest brother John, ‘for of what use will his fortune be if he cannot make a good use of it as a Gentleman[?]’. Thirty years later, as he settled John’s son Thomas into a legal career, Edward Parker expressed the hope that this would the family’s honour, as well as providing a livelihood, ‘I trust he will like his profession and that he will be a credit to his family and connections’.

**(Slide)** Younger sons were quick to remind seniors of their duty to find them a livelihood, if they felt that it was being ignored. In 1714, finding that his future prospects as a

factor in Aleppo were endangered by a lack of capital, Edward Radcliffe admonished his elder brother Ralph, that:

I can not believe you can concieve it consistent with justice & reason, that fortune, time, and hopes of success of an unhappy younger brother should be all sacrificed to the neccessity of an elder who by the expiration of your life is made intirely ease in his circumstances, and the younger meaning my self still remains destitute almost of subsistence unless at this present time put into a methode to improve your generous favors.

Elder brothers were also well aware of this responsibility. Thomas Parker reassured his father from Cambridge in 1802 that 'I know that I have Brothers at Home who are to have an Education as well as myself therefore I think it a duty incumbent upon me to live for as little expense as I possibly can'.

There was also a general agreement among the families in our sample that the reciprocal 'duty' of a younger son was to minimise his cost to the core family, particularly in adulthood. As James Windham, fourth and youngest son of Katherine Windham, put it in 1723, once they had received their portions younger children 'now must shift as well as they can, fortune sure will never leave them that are willing to get a livelyhood'. Similarly, Edward Parker wrote to his father Thomas in 1809, asking him to 'be assured nothing shall be wanting on my part to settle myself in a situation in life, which I trust I shall fulfill with credit to myself and family', by finding a legal situation in London. Younger sons appear to have accepted and internalised the parental desire for them to shift for themselves.

**(Slide)** Such internalisation, however, came at a psychological and social cost to younger sons. In 1876, the psychological burden of this desire to be self-sufficient was expressed by J. W. R. Parker in a letter to his mother from Sandhurst. He was in such financial straits, that

I am perfectly wretched about it, and it is not owing to my own recklessness that I am short of money as I have been most economical ... I lie awake at night thinking & scheming how to mend my affairs, but I see nothing before me but a hopeless blank. The little ambition I once had has almost disappeared, and my life is all a dream from which I strive hard to awake but cannot.

While his hopelessness may have been exacerbated by loneliness at Sandhurst, Parker's letter reveals the extent to which this financial imperative weighed on younger sons, and how little it had changed over the previous 150 years, although later generations of Parkers saw things quite differently, as we shall explain later.

Throughout the sample, it is evident that younger sons equated their own personal, adult freedom and autonomy with financial independence, an important component of elite masculinity. They judged their 'success' or 'failure' as men according to their ability to attain and maintain such independence. Such skills were, interestingly, associated with those required for estate ownership. The exercise of masculine autonomy by securing financial independence required the same personal self-discipline, prudence and industry that was necessary for the management of a great estate. Where sons acquired such skills, families could rejoice. In the 1850s, William Stratford Dugdale placed sons successfully into autonomous careers in the law, the army, and the navy, and reflected on his son Henry's return to India in 1861 that he had become, 'a most charming and well principled fellow'.

**(Slide)** Other sons had a much more difficult journey to secure an adult livelihood. This is illustrated particularly by the travails of Thomas Huddleston, as an apprentice to a merchant in Livorno in the early eighteenth century. As Huddleston's apprenticeship drew to an end, he pleaded with his parents for money to establish himself as a merchant in Italy, rather than have to earn his keep as a salaried agent or clerk. He assured them that he was fully aware of their need to provide for their other children, and of their wish that he lived as frugally as possible. However, for him, social failure was associated explicitly with continued financial dependence, if not on them, then on an Italian employer:

...if after all I must end my days in Servitude, why was I ever flatt'd in hopes of becoming a man by merchandising if I must never set up business...if once a man is Sallaried here by another it is an eternal discredit to him and disables him for ever from setting up of himself or making his fortune, therefore I leave you to guess what an affliction it would be to me who hitherto have been Continually flatter'd with hopes of becoming capable to stand on my own legs, and well look'd upon by ye principal people of ye Country and keep Company with none but the Chief people in ye City, whereas if I once serve for a sallary I shall be no more look'd upon by either Merchant or Gentleman, but be reckon'd amongst ye rascally fellows of ye Town.

For Huddleston, true manly autonomy was only to be gained by running his own business, and attaining financial independence, becoming his own master, and being able to live without reference either to his family or an employer.

Later, in the 1840s, Edward Parker was explicit with his nephew Richard about the fate that awaited him as a Liverpool merchant's clerk:

From what I learn you will have to be board an apprentice for 3 or 5 years & will have to work [underlined]. Many of the Houses preferring Working Clerks [underlined] to Gentleman's Son even with a large premium. In fact in those houses where business is the sole object of the Firm, they now expect their Clerks to commence with the drudgery of the Trade before taking a seat in the Counting Office.

The experiences of younger sons 'in the world' could lead to identities and behaviour that sometimes conflicted with those of the world of the landed gentry, particularly in terms of masculinities. Army life, an increasingly popular choice for younger sons into the nineteenth century, was often a progenitor of these conflicts. Into the 1830s and 1840s, both Edward Kyrle Money and Ambrose Barcroft Parker issued challenges or fought duels in the army, because it was expected that junior army officers would (and should) be more prepared to defend their honour physically, although Parker suffered eight months of arrest for calling a fellow officer a 'liar'. Ernie Money Kyrle brought his family name and honour into disrepute whilst serving in India in the 1860s. After reneging on his debts, and cheating Indian tradesmen out of beer, the regimental accountant wrote to his father to encapsulate his failure as a soldier, and a 'gentleman'. 'Believe me he is not fit for a soldier and he never will be', he stated starkly, a view that was the settled 'opinion of every one who knows him out here'.

Marriage was another aspect of the final attainment of independence. It was a virtual impossibility for younger sons sent away to undertake apprenticeships, or for those serving in the army, particularly in India. The frustrations generated by these constraints added to the sense of failure experienced by some younger sons. In other cases, parents believed that early marriage could damage their prospects and that of their siblings. When Arthur Acland sought

to get married as an undergraduate in Oxford in 1871, his father remonstrated with him, for putting his own interests above those of the wider family. He emphasized

how wanting in self-restraint he has been in compromising his own feelings so far when he ought to have been preparing for a life of work ... that he ought to not dream of taking a lady to his home on the income I ought to give him.

**(Slide)** Later, in agonizing over whether or not to take up a family-owned rectory (and a career in the church), Arthur admitted to his father that he had subconsciously equated marriage, which he had entered into in 1873, with independence and adult autonomy, forgetting that he lacked the resources to achieve this himself:

I am quite sure that when I have seen clergymen and a variety of excellent men getting engaged to be married marrying and doing all kinds of important acts not exactly without reference to home but quite independently of home, I have let all this influence me unconsciously a great deal, and by no means for good.

Arthur's self-deprecation also reflected his acknowledgement that he had become part of a different world, one that was in some ways at odds with his familial identity, a common experience amongst our sample and one with a striking continuity for much of our period.

Such then were the difficulties and anxieties produced at the sacrificial altar of primogeniture. However, whilst continuity of experience characterises the system for the majority of the period, we have detected distinct changes from the 1870s onwards. Arthur Acland's elder brother, Charles, had married in 1879 and fairly soon after it became clear that he and his wife, Gertrude, were experiencing problems in having children. Arthur grew increasingly concerned at the thought that he, as the second son, would have to take on the burdensome responsibility of a great estate, a role he neither welcomed nor felt fitted to. Early on in the process, in 1882, he reflected on the way his life had made of him a different type of man. 'The place [Killerton House] is full of my former self whom I look at as if a different creature...the huge trees, the big garden, the mass of servants...how much I shrink from it and seem to dislike it now...', he wrote in his diary. Later entries express a growing sense of anxiety at the fate that awaited him. Part of Arthur's anguish arose from a political and moral aversion to families such as his, but that, itself, was a reflection of a growing level of opposition to the gentry and the aristocracy, opposition that would eventually contribute to their decline and fall.

**(Slide)** The agonising of J. W. R. Parker looked rather different in the next generation, after the family had inherited the Browsholme estate. His only son, Robert, wrote about his father's early career in terms that suggest that the grass was greener for younger sons when contemplating their futures.

when you went into the Army you were a 2nd son, with possibly no chance of succeeding to Browsholme. You knew that you would get your allowance and probably no property to worry about. Therefore you were absolutely free to go into the Army, and did not need to think of anything but your own future.

The thoughts of these two sons illustrate the burden that estate ownership represented by the early twentieth century when incomes and status were in general decline. The life of a younger son was, by this period, a more attractive option, one less likely to ruin the family patrimony and name. Robert's position as his father's only son and Arthur's likely inheritance due to his elder brother's childless marriage meant that they were bound to inherit

this burdensome responsibility and suffer the anxiety of penury and decline that had formerly been reserved for younger sons.

### Conclusion (Slide)

In 1600 Thomas Wilson noted the virtue of younger sons' lives in his work *The State of England* because, as he stated, 'it makes us industrious to apply ourselves to letters or to arms', to such an extent that they might exceed their elder brother 'in honour and reputation'. This virtuousness, though came at a cost because, as he also noted, younger sons stood to inherit only 'that which the cat hath left on the malt heap, perhaps some small annuity during his life, or what please our elder brother's worship to bestow upon us'. In gentry families, then, the needs of the many were sacrificed for the needs of the few and for the longer term persistence of the family name and wealth into future generations.

This was the essential problem for younger sons. They were born of wealthy, though not noble families, yet they were expected to make their own way in a competitive and unforgiving world whilst their elder brothers gained the full benefit of the family patrimony. Without this sacrifice, though, it is unlikely that their social group would have survived with their lands intact and their wealth and status assured. Under a system of partible and more equitable inheritance ultimately, they too would have suffered the effects of impoverishment. Younger sons' experiences produced contradictions and conflicts of identity in terms of social status but also in terms of masculinity. They were social hybrids, belonging neither to the world of country houses nor to the middling world of trade and professions. This often unsatisfactory position could be damaging to their social and psychological well-being and many felt impoverished in financial terms too, as is evident from the small sample of correspondence which we have shared with you today.

This, we argue, is due to deeper contradictions in the internal and external identities of younger sons, the space between their upbringing and their everyday interactions 'out in the world', the distinction between 'I' and 'me'. The external classification of their identities, according to Jenkins' model, was at odds with their internal identification derived from their belonging to a social group of which in adult life they were only partial members. Their careers took them away from the leisured *rentier* lifestyles of their parents and peers. While they aspired to remain *gentlemanly* (that is, to attain sufficient income to maintain the social characteristics inculcated in childhood), they had to enter professions, trades and administrative roles that often blurred and transgressed such social distinctions and categories. Thus, their style of life might end up contradicting their sense of self. Social interaction in their everyday lives and discourse with their families often deepened these contradictions. So their experiences cut across and confused the relationship between these two aspects of identity. As Richard Jenkins, drawing on Bordieu, has noted 'where a collectivity begins and ends is not mappable using the sociometric equivalent of a dressmaker's tape.' Younger sons represent those vague and shifting boundaries in the case of the gentry.

However, we suggest that such contradictions could be resolved more readily after the 'demographic transition' of the mid-nineteenth century, and as the power of the gentry declined. After the 1840s, gentry families often had fewer younger sons, and might devote proportionately more resources to their education, in order to secure them a future in the burgeoning professions and civil service. As rental incomes declined, and taxation burdens

rose, in the two generations after 1873, the heir's fortune came to be regarded as more of a burden, from which younger sons were 'free'. This ushered in a more positive outlook for many younger sons as the tension between the individual and the social group was reversed. Now the eldest son often envied the opportunities available to his younger siblings, and their ability to avoid the dynastic, territorial and managerial responsibilities of a landed estate.