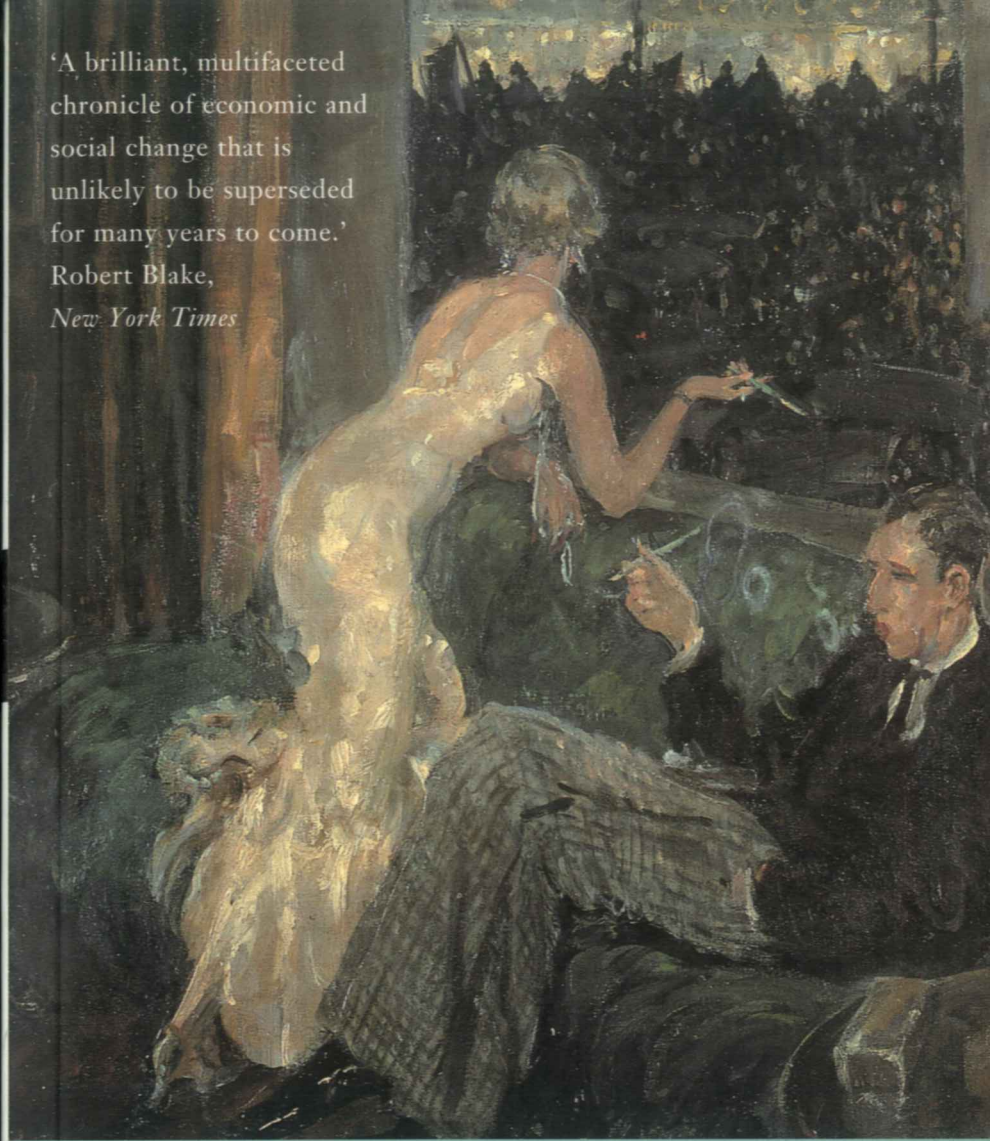
'A brilliant, multifaceted chronicle of economic and social change that is unlikely to be superseded for many years to come.'
Robert Blake,
New York Times



THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY

DAVID CANNADINE

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Since the references to each chapter constitute what is in effect a running bibliography, I have dispensed with a separate list of further reading. In each chapter, references are given in full with every first citation, and are abbreviated thereafter. The place of publication is the United Kingdom, unless otherwise stated.

In order to avoid encumbering the text with a excess of citations, I have followed the convention outlined in F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (1963), and have not given specific references to such standard works of reference as *Who Was Who*, *Burke's Peerage*, and G. E. Cokayne, *The Complete Peerage*.

For the same reason, I have not provided explicit citations to John Bateman, *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* (4th edn., 1883), when giving figures for the acreage and/or rental of landed estates.

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PROLOGUE: PRESUPPOSITIONS AND PROBLEMS

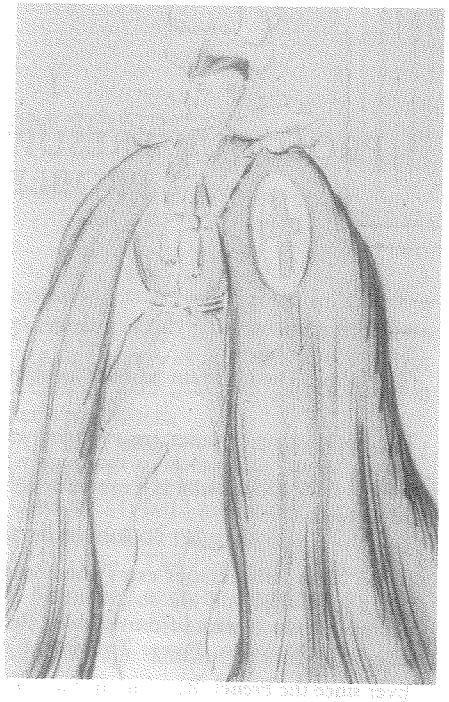
> A more discriminating 'history from above' [is trying] to catch up with 'history from below'.
> (T. Nairn, 'The Glamour of Backwardness', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 11 January 1985, p. 13.)

> The notion that societies are stratified into three separate 'dimensions', of 'class', 'status' and 'power' is thoroughly familiar in the academic literature. But . . . only occasionally is it explicitly adopted as the framework for empirical research.
> (W. G. Runciman, *Sociology in its Place* (1970), p. 102.)

> In the 1880s, aristocracies everywhere were in decline . . . The nobility were going gradually, and not so gradually, to the wall. In most countries, the expression 'the decline of the notables' fits the decade well enough.
> (N. Stone, *Europe Transformed, 1878–1919* (1983), pp. 20, 21, 42.)

> Ever since the French Revolution, the shadow of catastrophe had on occasion flitted through English aristocratic minds. About the 1880s, the shadow deepened, and something like the mood of a beleaguered noblesse began to take shape.
> (D. Spring, 'Land and Politics in Edwardian England', *Agricultural History*, LVIII (1984), p. 18.)

When seeking for a partner worthy of the delectable Zuleika Dobson, Max Beerbohm created the Duke of Dorset, an aristocratic paragon, endowed with Olympian wealth, rank, and intellect. His inherited possessions were stupendous, his riches were incalculable, his British titles were innumerable, and he was in addition a prince of the Holy Roman Empire and a duke in the peerage of France. As an Oxford undergraduate, he took a First in Mods. and carried off a clutch of university prizes, he was awarded the Garter by the government in instant recognition of a dazzling speech he delivered impromptu in the House of Lords, and he excelled at any human activity to which he turned his hand or his head. Yet for all his youth, his great position, his brilliant attainments, and the splendid prospects that lay before him, the Duke of Dorset was a fallen idol, who drowned himself in a gesture at once utterly magnificent yet totally futile.[1] And, appropriately enough, the novel that related his fictional and fanciful plunge into the River Cherwell was first



2. 'The fullness of his glory and his might', The Duke of Dorset by Max Beerbohm.

published in 1911, the very year that, in reality, witnessed the most successful assault in recent history on the House of Lords – and thus on the hereditary, titled, landowning classes of the British Isles.

This volume may seem to have almost nothing in common with Max Beerbohm's frothy, light-hearted Edwardian fantasy: it is a history book conceived in Cambridge rather than a love story set in Oxford, and it is about a social class rather than a courting couple. Nevertheless, in his fortune and in his fate, the Duke of Dorset may be taken as a larger-than-life exemplar of the people with whom it is concerned: the gentry and grandees, the notables and nobles of the British Isles, as they have lived out their individual and collective lives during the last one hundred years. As late as the 1870s, these patricians were still the most wealthy, the most powerful, and the most glamorous people in the country, corporately – and understandably – conscious of themselves as God's elect. But during the hundred years that followed, their wealth withered, their power faded, their glamour tarnished, and their collective sense of identity and purpose gradually but inexorably weakened. This book seeks to recover and re-create, to evoke and explain, the decline and fall of this once pre-eminent élite, one of the greatest changes to have

occurred in modern British history. How, when, and why did this pride of lions decay into a fable of unicorns?

i. Bias and Intention

E. H. Carr's oft-quoted injunction that you cannot understand works of history without first understanding the historian who writes them is of especial force in the case of this particular book.[2] Anyone who writes at length on such a controversial and contemporary subject as the eclipse the British patrician élite is bound to be both negatively constrained and positively influenced by the prejudices of his outlook and the circumstances of his life. The fact that we historians make a profession of studying past people in past societies does not thereby render us miraculously immune from those same traps of time and temperament, however much we may be trained to recognize them and to correct for them. Moreover, I have written this book with a definite view of modern British history and of modern British historians held firmly in mind. And these, as well as my own background, need some brief exposition.

As a lower-middle-class product of the Welfare State, educated at grammar school and Oxbridge, I come from a social group generally renowned for its conservatism, its deference, its loyalty to hierarchy, and its acquiescence in the status quo. That I should choose to write of those much higher up the social scale than myself is no more (but also no less?) remarkable or significant than the fact that upper-middle-class historians should be among the foremost writers of the lives of the labouring masses.[3] Like them, I can claim no first-hand acquaintance with much of what I write: in this case the management (or sale) of a landed estate, the enjoyment (or loss) of an unearned income, the day-to-day experience (or termination) of country-house life, the wielding (or weakening) of political power. And I must also declare my belief that some of the most attractive and abiding features of life in Britain today are the legacy of those who form the subject of this book – a view that some may find intrinsically distasteful and implausible, and that others may feel makes the general tone far too indulgent and uncritical.

But I have also been described by a prominent historian of political theory as a 'left-wing intellectual.'[4] This may merely imply an excessive range of political sympathies, or a regrettable lack of firm ideological commitment, and if so, it will no doubt be reflected in the pages that follow. More positively, it suggests a determination not to accept individuals and institutions at their own self-evaluation, a refusal that some members of the right ('I have no politics, but I vote

Conservative for the good of the country') may find disconcertingly unattractive. And, at least in part, this book is written very much from such a sceptical standpoint. It is not merely trying to discover what members of the patrician élite thought about themselves in their silver age of vanishing supremacies: it also seeks to understand them better than they could ever possibly have understood themselves. It is concerned to explore the gap between what they thought was happening and what was actually happening; and it tries to lay bare the reality behind the myths that they invented or believed about themselves, rather than merely provide yet further historical validation for them.

In these ways, the subject and content of this work is influenced by me; in other ways, much more important, it is influenced by the prevailing sense of the past that rules in Britain today, and by the current state of the historical art and of the historical profession. To begin with, it is written in dissent from, and in protest against, the present craze for national heritage, which so often misrepresents the substance and seriousness of aristocratic existence.[5] All too frequently, the contemporary cult of the country house depicts the old landowning classes as elegant, exquisite patrons of the arts, living lives of tasteful ease in beautiful surroundings. Of course, there is some truth in this. But as a representation of the totality of patrician existence, it misleads and distorts, by failing to recognize them for what they really were: a tough, tenacious, and resourceful élite, who loved money, loved power, and loved the good life, and who surrendered their once pre-eminent position with feelings compounded of ignorance and awareness, resentment and regret, folly and fortitude, anger and resignation. In their declining years, as in their heyday, they were very interesting, very important, very complex, not always very refined, and not always very agreeable. By thus treating them seriously rather than sentimentally, this book seeks to rescue the British upper classes from the endless (and mindless) veneration of posterity.

In the same way, this work is written in protest against the current fashion in British history writing that stresses continuity at the expense of change.[6] Of course, it is never easy to get the balance right between what is old and what is new in any past age, and it cannot be denied that during the 1960s, 'crisis' and 'revolution' were among the two most over-used words in the historian's vocabulary. But now the fashion has gone too far the other way, and it has become all too common for scholars to claim that nothing important ever actually happened, that there are no great landmarks in our national story. The account unfolded in this book gives only very limited support to such a constipated view of the past. Undeniably,

there were elements of continuity and survival in the history of the British patrician classes from the 1880s, and they are given full and substantial treatment here. But taking the period as a whole, the changes overwhelmingly outweigh the continuities, as five centuries of aristocratic history and hegemony were irrevocably reversed in less than one hundred years.

This book is also written in opposition to the increasing fragmentation of Clio's raiment, to what Professor Hexter rightly and disparagingly described as 'tunnel' history, a weakness to which the study of the recent British past is particularly prone.[7] Political history, economic history, constitutional history, and diplomatic history have, during the last thirty years, been joined by social history, urban history, family history, women's history, the history of childhood, the new economic history, and a host of others. Undeniably, these burgeoning and proliferating sub-specialisms have greatly enriched our understanding of the past by drawing attention to sources and subjects hitherto and otherwise neglected. But such sub-disciplinary chauvinism has its dangers, too. Sometimes, it leads to sterile demarcation disputes, inflated claims, and excessive introversion. Even worse, it means that the totality, complexity, and diversity of the unfolding historical process is often completely lost sight of. However imperfectly, I have sought in this book to poke my head above the many specialist molehills, to describe the eclipse of the British patrician classes in its many and manifold guises.

These rather panoramic ambitions are geographical as well as methodological. For this is emphatically a work of *British*, not just of English history.[8] It is the study of the interlocking, interrelated, and interacting élites of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, which had come into being as a supra-national territorial entity during the period from the 1780s to the 1830s, which had survived and prospered during the half-century that followed, but which then gradually fragmented and decayed, and ceased to be what it had once been: a truly British territorial class. In addition, this book also encompasses, where necessary, the British Empire, something that is now lamented even more absent-mindedly than it was created, but that was an integral part of the patricians' world vision from the 1880s to the 1930s. Whether there was a distinctive 'British history' for the middle or for the working classes remains unclear and unproven. But there certainly was for the people at the top.

The history of this extended, supra-national élite, which even in decline encompassed and transcended the confines of the four constituent nations, is a large enough subject, in all conscience. But to obtain a proper perspective, there must also be some broader,

external viewpoint. 'Fog in Channel: Continent cut off', has been the prevailing weather condition in which most of us have recently been doing British history. Yet to write of these British gentry and magnificoes without some comparative, continental perspective is both misleading and unwise. Most members of the patrician class also thought of themselves as part of a broader, continental aristocracy, into which they married, and with whom they were at ease in the courts, chancelleries, and country houses of Europe. Moreover, many claims have been made for the 'uniqueness' of the British territorial classes: but all of them implicitly assume continental comparisons that are rarely, if ever, actually made.[9] However speculatively, this book is intended to rectify that omission.

To that extent, the decline and fall of the old order can be understood, analyzed, and explained only by looking beyond it, and by evaluating it with at least some reference to the parallel experiences of similar élite groups in other countries. But in addition, because class formation, class consciousness, and class disintegration do not occur in a vacuum, the eclipse of these notables must also be seen – and in large part explained – in terms of its interaction with other classes and social groups within Britain. In this sense, the history and experience of the British landed establishment can neither be evoked nor explained simply or entirely in terms of itself. Ultimately, the limits to patrician survival were set, not so much by what they themselves were willing and able to do on their own initiative, but rather by what people from other classes allowed them to do. And in the century from the 1880s, they were allowed much less freedom than ever before. To that extent, the social history of this one class must encompass, however sketchily, the societal history of all classes.[10]

Given the scope and ambition of this work, it should now be clear that it is not, and could not be, based primarily on archival sources that have been individually researched. It took Lawrence Stone fourteen years to collect material from the much thinner archives of the much smaller landed élite of Tudor and Stuart England.[11] For one scholar to undertake such an enterprise for the much larger landed élite of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, whose more voluminous papers have survived in far greater abundance, would be quite impossible. Put more positively, it is important to remember that many of these archives have already been plundered by historians, usually looking at single families or counties or individuals or estates. The result has been a massive proliferation, during the last quarter-century, of dissertations, monographs, and articles on different aspects of the decline and fall of the British landed establishment during the last one hundred years.[12] And it is

these that provide the essential scholarly base for this present work, as they must for any serious piece of historical writing.

But while this book is dependent on – and appreciative of – the mass of learned literature on the subject, it is also concerned to transcend the very real limitations of such material. Although there is still a great deal more detailed information to be gleaned by this method, it is already clear in some areas that the law of diminishing returns is setting in. But more importantly, the narrow approach that is embodied in such monographic work virtually precludes any appreciation of the broader ebb and flow of the historical process. Studies of individual estates, of the politics of one specific county, or of a particular aristocratic profession, often seem completely unaware of the diverse totality of patrician life. The purpose of this book is to stand back, and to survey the broader historical landscape, to re-create the greater historical drama of which these detailed case studies are but a small constituent part. As such, the perspective that it offers on the aristocracy is unapologetically that of the parachutist, not the truffle hunter.

The result is that this is essentially a public rather than a private history of the gentry and the grandees. It is not much concerned with the realm of aristocratic emotions, with states of feeling, with sex, marriage, and child-rearing, upper-class style. This is in no sense to belittle the importance of this large and amorphous subject: some very good books have been written on these topics, and more are badly needed. But here these matters are largely left aside. And this means that there is a second realm of patrician life about which this volume has almost nothing to say. There are not many women in this book, and those few who do appear in its pages are usually either adjuncts to men or surrogate men. I fear that this will give the greatest offence to many feminist historians, and for that I can only apologize. There is an urgent need for more women's history of upper-class women.[13] By definition, this book does not provide it. It is concerned with wealth, status, power, and class consciousness, which in this period were preponderantly masculine assets and attributes. And that must be the justification for the seemingly chauvinistic approach I have adopted here.

These are the personal and scholarly biases of which I myself have been aware while I have been working on this book. Like all professional historians, I have sought to make it both as accurate and as objective as possible, viewing my material with (I hope) sympathy and detachment.[14] And, like all works of history, I believe that it says much more about the time *of* which I write than the time *in* which I write, and far more about the people of whom I write than about the person who has actually written it.[15] Nevertheless, in

putting this book together, some degree of personal bias is unavoidable and, to the extent that I am aware of this, I have tried to lay it bare at the outset.

ii. Wealth, Status, and Power

So much for the author: but who, exactly, is the book about? To state the obvious, it is about a large number of people with various things in common: the grandees and gentry of the British Isles during the century from the 1880s to our own time. Therein lies the substance and the significance of the subject; but therein lies the practical difficulty in dealing with it. Inevitably, some collective vocabulary must be employed to describe and summarize this mass of individuals, and some abstract, organizing concepts must be used to sort the voluminous material that relates to them into some intelligible order.[16] As such, this book is, of necessity, a monstrous oversimplification of the richness and variety of the patrician condition. But that is unavoidable: like any work of history, it summarizes key features, but does not exhaust realities.[17] More precisely, it seeks to recover, over time, both the objective circumstances and the subjective consciousness of the British grandees and gentry in their century of decline and decay, disintegration and disarray.

The best way to recover the objective circumstances of this – or any – élite is to employ the three approaches to social analysis devised by Max Weber, and recently reformulated by W. G. Runciman.[18] The first is to consider the patricians' financial resources: how rich were these people in the days of their economic pre-eminence, and how, when, and why did their wealth diminish over time? The second is to look at their social position: in what ways were they the most high-ranking and illustrious group in the years of their social supremacy, and how, when, and why was their unchallenged status subsequently eroded? And the third line of inquiry is to consider their political activities: how powerful were the gentry and grandees when they formed the only governing class in the British Isles, and how, when, and why did they cease to fulfil these functions? Before explaining how this unrivalled wealth, supreme prestige, and undisturbed power was undermined, it is necessary to describe the substance of it during the 1870s, the last decade of apparently undisputed patrician pre-eminence.

In terms of its objective economic circumstances, the British landed establishment still formed the country's wealth élite during the third quarter of Queen Victoria's reign. Individually, most of them owned estates of at least 1,000 acres, and collectively this meant that they possessed the overwhelming majority of the land of the British Isles:

Table 1.1: Land of the British Isles Held in Estates of 1,000+ Acres, c.1880

Country	Number of owners	Total acres owned	% of total land area owned
England	4,736	12,825,643	56.1
Wales	672	1,490,915	60.78
Ireland	3,745	15,802,737	78.4
Scotland	1,758	17,584,828	92.82
Total	10,911	47,704,123	66.14

Source: Calculated from: P.P., H.C., 1876 (335), *Summary of the Returns of Owners of Land in England and Wales . . . And Similar Return for Scotland*, pp. 21, 33; P.P., H.C., 1876 (422), *Summary of the Return of Owners of Land in Ireland*, p. 25.

Here was the statistical support for those who asserted that landownership was highly concentrated in the hands of a few. Indeed, the imperfections and inadequacies of this data are such that they probably overestimate the number of individuals and underestimate the true extent of their dominance. A more accurate figure is probably 4,200 owners for England and Wales, 2,500 for Ireland, and 800 for Scotland, which together comes comfortingly close to those 7,000 families that A. Arnold, reworking these same statistics, claimed owned between them four-fifths of the land of the British Isles in the late 1870s.[19]

Within this relatively homogeneous and monolithic group, it is helpful to provide three sub-divisions. The first, numbering about 6,000 families in the late 1870s, were the small landowners, whose estates were between 1,000 and 10,000 acres, and whose gross rental incomes were between £1,000 and £10,000 a year. They encompassed the local village squire and the commanding county personage, the full-time landowner who lived on his estate and the full-time *rentier* who lived there merely for recreation, a family locally established for centuries, and a newly arrived self-made man. It was at this level that the landed classes shaded most frequently and least perceptibly into other economic groups, and drawing the line is not always easy. Some just below would count in; some just above would not. Towards the lower end of the scale, landowners would possess only one estate and mansion; they would rarely visit London; and they would have only their rents to live off. At the top end of the scale, there might be more than one house and estate, some non-agricultural income, and even a London town house. But overriding these variations was the fundamental fact that the majority owned at least 1,000 acres.

The second group, numbering perhaps 750 families, were the middling proprietors, with estates ranging from 10,000 to 30,000 acres, and with corresponding incomes from £10,000 to £30,000 a year. Again, there were many variations. Some, like the Earl of Hardwicke, had almost all of their holdings consolidated in one county: in this case, 18,900 out of the total of 19,300 acres were located in Cambridgeshire. Others owned estates in several counties, like the Earl of Macclesfield, whose 14,500 acres were divided between Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, and Devon. Some, like Ralph Sneyd, enjoyed extensive non-agricultural income; while others, like Earl Beauchamp, were entirely dependent on their rentals. Many were exclusively English or Irish or Welsh or Scottish owners; others like Sir George Tapps-Gervis-Meyrick owned lands that straddled national boundaries. But whatever the particular circumstances and distribution of their holdings, all these middling proprietors were, economically, great men, rarely tied down to one estate, and all able (though not all willing) to maintain a London house as well. As Bence Jones explained, 'a man who only wanted all the conveniences and comforts that London and the country could give, could have got them for £10,000 a year.'[20]

At the very top of the pyramid were 250 territorial magnates, each with more than 30,000 acres and £30,000 a year to their name. Assuming their land to be worth thirty-three years' purchase, they were all, by definition, millionaires. The majority held estates in many counties (although a few like the Derbys and the Northumberlands maintained very compact holdings), owned at least two great mansions in the country, and boasted a grand London house, in Grosvenor or Belgrave Squares, in Park Lane or Piccadilly. Many were extensively involved in non-agricultural forms of estate exploitation, like mines and docks, markets and building estates, and some, like the Dukes of Sutherland, also maintained massive investments in the Funds and in railway shares. At the very pinnacle of this group were the Dukes of Dorset and of Omnium as they really existed – the twenty-nine prodigiously wealthy super-rich with incomes in excess of £75,000 a year (see Appendix A). These were families like the Buccleuchs, the Derbys, the Devonshires, and the Bedfords, who owned lands in several counties, who sometimes had more country houses than they knew what to do with, and who possessed private art collections almost without rival in the world.

Viewed as an economic class, the gentry and grandees were thus both the wealth élite in that they encompassed most of the richest men in the country, and the territorial élite in that they owned most of the land of Britain. At the very apex, the super-rich among them were undoubtedly worth more than any other group, even the most

opulent bankers or financiers. And they were very much a *British* landowning élite, whose supra-national territorial agglomerations transcended the limits of the four constituent nations. Taking the small landowners, the middling proprietors, and the territorial magnates together, it seems clear that, collectively, they owned a greater proportion of the land of the British Isles than had their forebears at any time since the Reformation.[21] Moreover, many of them had benefited very greatly from the Industrial Revolution, while agriculture itself had been very prosperous during the period from the 1840s to the mid-1870s. Not surprisingly, then, land remained the securest way in which to hold wealth. In more senses than one, the patricians who held it so tightly and so monopolistically in mid-Victorian Britain were truly the lords of the earth.

Seen from another perspective, these same people were, in addition, the status élite. In objective terms, they were virtually the sole recipients of those highly esteemed titles of honour that defined and preserved the gradations of society, and their own position at the very top. At the summit of this system came the five ranks of the peerage, recognized by law as the hereditary nobility, and holding privileges denied to commoners. After the extensions, conflations, and rationalizations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, this had indeed become a truly British nobility, as if to parallel a truly British territorial class.[22] In 1880, there were 580 peers, of whom 431 were hereditary members of the House of Lords by virtue of possessing United Kingdom peerages. In addition, there were 7 peeresses in their own right, and 41 Scottish and 101 Irish peers, who were unable to sit in the Lords because they lacked UK titles.[23] Compared with their continental counterparts, their judicial privileges were substantial but their fiscal exemptions nil. But this did not matter: there was no rival to their position at the top of an objective hierarchy of British ranks. As Edmund Burke put it, 'Nobility is a graceful ornament to the civil order. It is the Corinthian capital of polished society.'[24] As the last quarter of the nineteenth century opened, that remained essentially correct: the peerage was still peerless.

Between the peers and the commoners came the baronets, of whom there were 856 in 1880.[25] This, again, was a legally established title, a hereditary knighthood, the holders of which ranked next to the peers in order of precedence. Indeed, many baronets ultimately became peers, and some rose very high into the ranks of the nobility, as with the Dukes of Devonshire and of Marlborough. Originally, as with the peerage, there were separate orders for each kingdom: baronets of England, then Ireland, and finally Scotland were established in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, as a

way of raising money for royal coffers. The subsequent union of England and Scotland, and then of Great Britain and Ireland, meant that these separate orders of baronets were superseded – in the manner of the peerage – by one order of baronets of the UK. In law, their privileges were even fewer than those of the nobility. 'It seems a pity,' lamented *Burke's Landed Gentry* in 1883, 'that so important an hereditary order should possess no designating mark of distinction.' But for any ambitious commoner, the title was highly prized.

The third layer of the status rankings of titles of honour were the landed gentry of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1883, there were 4,250 families listed in *Burke*, to which another 250 should be added for cadet branches spawned by other families from the landed gentry, the baronetage, or the peerage. Unlike the peers and the baronets, the landed gentry possessed neither hereditary titles nor legal privileges. But that did not matter: for it was obvious to contemporaries that the landed gentry were for all practical purposes the equivalent of continental nobles, with their hereditary estates, their leisured lifestyle, their social pre-eminence, and their armorial bearings. Even if they did not constitute an order legally speaking, they certainly behaved like one, and were viewed as one by outsiders. The preface to the 1886 edition of *Burke* caught this exactly:

> The landed gentry, the untitled aristocracy of England, Ireland and Scotland, is a class unexampled and unrivalled in Europe, invested with no hereditary generation . . . this class has had, and continues to hold, the foremost place in each county. A right to arms, sometimes of remote antiquity, sometimes of modern acquisition, serves to supply the want of an hereditary dignity, and is the rallying point, around which are collected various members of the family.[26]

Whereas small landowner, middling proprietor, and territorial magnate are class designations, signifying particular gradations of wealth, landed gentleman, baronet, and peer are status designations, signifying precise degrees of rank. But there were other ways in which the high status of the territorial patricians was recognized and expressed. In law, their affairs were ordered by, and were subject to, a variety of arrangements and rules exclusive to themselves, and practised by no other group. They used strict settlement and entail, partly to keep their estates, houses, heirlooms, and titles (if any) together, and partly to ensure that they descended intact in the direct male line. Middle-class people, by contrast, tended to divide their money equally, and had no sense of the elder son's importance in carrying on the line. But for the grandees and gentry, primogeniture ruled: and entail and strict settlement were the means of giving effect

to it. As G. C. Brodrick explained, 'it has been a most powerful agent in moulding the sentiment of the class by which the custom of primogeniture is maintained.'[27]

More subjectively, their lives were lived in certain ways, and in accordance with certain attitudes, which also served to mark them off from the rest of the population. They were educated in public schools and sometimes at Oxbridge; they lived in country mansions and town houses. They were of gentle status in that they did not have to work for a living; they were a leisured class in that they had no occupation; and they were usually endogamous in their choice of marriage partners.[28] In the localities, they made up county society, and in London they were the foundation of high society. Gentlemen, by definition, had a safe seat in the saddle, and were very sensitive to matters of honour, precedence, and protocol. In terms of the amount of time and effort they devoted to it, most members of the patrician élite were more interested in spending money than in making it. They possessed a strongly developed sense of liberality and hospitality – of keeping up their position. They were concerned with voluntary service to the state, both locally and nationally, as civilians and as military men. And they accepted, implicitly and absolutely, an unequal and hierarchical society, in which their place was undisputedly at the top.[29]

This was the formal and informal system of status and rank, title and honour, as it existed among the élite in Britain during the early 1870s. Two points stand out most markedly. Once again, as if to parallel the pattern of landholding, this was an essentially *British* status stratum, into which earlier, separate systems from England, Scotland, and Ireland had been integrated and absorbed. Moreover, even by the mid-Victorian period, nearly a century after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, no new economic or social group had yet come into being that had mounted any significant or sustained challenge to their social hegemony. The members of the titled and genteel classes were not merely the lords of the earth, they were also the stars of the firmament. They boasted unrivalled and unquestioned glamour and prestige. Put another way, almost anybody who was anybody in the British Isles before the 1880s was to be found in one or other of *Burke's* consolidated and systematic guides to the titled and the leisured classes: the *Peerage and Baronetage*, and the *Landed Gentry*.

These notables not only formed the wealth and the status élites of Britain in the 1870s: they were also still very much the governing élite of the nation. Not all of them held important power positions, because the number of notables far exceeded the number of available posts, both nationally and locally. Nevertheless, the majority of

these jobs were indeed held by men of patrician background. Until the 1880s, the lower house of Parliament was essentially a landowners' club: the majority of MPs were recruited from the British landed establishment – Irish peers, sons of UK peers, baronets, or country gentlemen. As late as the 1860s, it was claimed that one-third of the Commons was filled by no more than sixty families, all landed, and that three-quarters of all MPs were patricians.[30] The upper house was even more the monopoly of landowners, and during the nineteenth century, these hereditary, aristocratic legislators remained at the apex of the power élite. They could throw out any Commons measure, with the exception of money bills; they dominated every cabinet directly or through their relatives; they virtually monopolized important offices like the Foreign Secretaryship; and Prime Ministers sat in the Lords for a longer span of time than in the Commons.

In the same way, national administration and local government were still dominated by the landed classes in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. The judiciary, the army, the church, the law, and the civil service were the favourite occupations of younger sons who wanted a high status job that perpetuated their patrician position. Most of those who made their way to the top in these professions were either recruited from, or subsequently drawn into, the landed-establishment world. In the case of the army and the church, this link was reinforced by purchase and by property; and in the case of the home and overseas civil service, by the exercise of patrician patronage. The ethos of all these great professions was leisured and amateur, and most of them were rurally-based and hierarchically organized. In the countryside, too, these grandees and gentry were still the unchallenged authorities, responsible to no one but themselves. As owners of great estates, they wielded substantial private influence, which merely reinforced their public power. The Lord-Lieutenant was invariably a peer, while the administration and enforcement of justice was in the hands of the JPs, a self-perpetuating oligarchy rightly – and significantly – known as the 'rural House of Lords'.

Until the 1880s, the patricians provided most of the personnel in most of these power positions. But their political dominance was more complex and complete than that. In part, this was because of their success in restricting the agenda of political discussion, largely to their own advantage.[31] Popular pressure, and demands for major reforming measures, made little real impact during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century. For most of the time, the governing class were able to confine the substance of politics to a limited number of issues, largely concerned with finance, religion, administration, and foreign affairs. But the structure of politics, and especially the personnel of politics, were rarely discussed. Throughout the years from the 1820s to the 1860s, the aristocracy might have liked to believe (or to regret) that they had made many concessions to the forces of change; and no doubt to some extent they had.[32] But in practical terms, these did not amount to much. Their position of dominance was so entrenched, so complete, that their generosity (or cowardice, or foolishness, or self-deception) in making concessions mattered far less than it was commonplace to suppose.

Moreover, this position as the power élite also rested on popular sanction. For the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, the majority of the population unquestioningly accepted the patricians' right to rule. Landowners had leisure, confidence, experience, expertise: they had time to govern; they were expected to govern. The business of businessmen was business; the business of landowners was government.[33] For generations, and in some cases for centuries, the same gentry and noble families had sent representatives into Parliament. Dynasties like the Derbys, the Bedfords, the Devonshires, and the Salisburys were generally recognized to constitute the great governing families of the realm. To most people, this was the natural order of things: it had been ever thus. As such, these gentry and grandees possessed that most indispensable of all characteristics in a dominant group – the sense shared, not only by themselves but by the populace, that their claim to govern was legitimate.[34] They were not only the lords of the earth and the stars of the firmament: they were also the makers of history.

Such was the British landed establishment as it existed, apparently secure, serene, and unchallenged in the early 1870s, a formidable agglomeration of territory and titles, of power and influence. In terms of its resources, its prestige, and its dominance, it was a truly supra-national class, embracing the whole of the British Isles with its patrician tentacles. In terms of wealth, it probably owned more of the land of the British Isles than ever before. In terms of status, it had largely and successfully preserved its aristocratic exclusiveness, and remained unsullied by the advent of the Industrial Revolution. And in terms of power, it possessed a very unusual degree of influence over both the centre and the periphery and, despite genuine beliefs to the contrary, had in fact made remarkably few concessions to the forces of demos during the previous half-century. To the extent that the gentry and the grandees formed what Tocqueville had celebrated as a liberal élite, it prompts the comment that with such wealth, such status, and such power, they could well afford to be.[35] It was, as Disraeli truly remarked, a time when the world was for the few – and especially for the very few who have been described here.

iii. Correlation, Comparisons, and Consciousness

The objective circumstances of the British grandees and gentry in their heyday up to the 1870s, and in their years of decline thereafter, are most appropriately analyzed in these terms of wealth, status, and power. Of course, as W. H. Mallock long ago foresaw, there are genuine difficulties in applying these essentially abstract and water-tight categories to the messy reality of patrician life:

> The relation that prevails, and indeed has always prevailed in England, between birth and riches, between rank, power and talent, may not, perhaps, be the most important problem in the world; but, excepting Chinese grammar, I doubt if anything is more complicated; and judgement on it that even approaches truth is as nice a thing as the most delicate chemical compound.[36]

Put more positively, this means that until the 1870s, there was an exceptionally high correlation between wealth, status, and power, for the simple reason that they were all territorially determined and defined. Land was wealth: the most secure, reliable, and permanent asset. Land was status: its ownership conferred unique and unrivalled celebrity. And land was power: over the locality, the county, and the nation. As Trollope made Archdeacon Grantly say: 'Land gives so much more than the rent. It gives position and influence and political power, to say nothing about the game.'[37]

Indeed, wealth, status, and power were so closely intertwined in the case of the British patrician classes that it is virtually impossible to write of one without mentioning the others. So, until the 1870s, there was a broad and general correspondence between the hierarchy of wealth and the hierarchy of status.[38] Of course, there was no exact fit between small landowners and landed gentry, between middling proprietors and baronets, or between territorial magnates and the House of Lords. Some dukes, like St Albans, Leeds, Manchester, and Somerset, were nowhere nearly as great in wealth as in status. Among earls, some like Derby, Lonsdale, and Sefton were very rich; while others like Clarendon, Granville, and Beaconsfield were relatively poor. And some untitled landowners, although mere gentry or baronets, held acres sufficiently broad to place them among the territorial magnates in terms of wealth. In England, for example, in the 1870s, one-quarter of those with incomes from land in excess of £30,000 a year were commoners: they counted relatively low in terms of status but relatively high in terms of wealth.[39]

Nevertheless, the system as a whole was sufficiently close to the ideal type of high correlation between wealth and status to be credible. In 1880, there were 580 peers. Of these, 450 (over 75 per cent) owned at least 2,000 acres, and 525 (over 90 per cent) held some land. Only 60 peers (10 per cent) were landless, and between 1832 and 1883, only 9 new landless peers were created.[40] In 1883, there were also 848 baronets, of whom 413 (49 per cent) owned at least 2,000 acres, and it seems reasonable to suppose that between two-thirds and three-quarters owned at least some land. As for the landed gentry, they too were, by definition, territorially based. As *Burke* explained in 1886, 'the tenure of land was, in the olden time, the test of rank and position, and even now . . . it remains the same.' Only one-third of the 4,250 landed gentry held estates of over 2,000 acres. But approximately 90 per cent of those listed in *Burke* owned country seats with smaller estates attached. Altogether, this makes a total of roughly 5,500 landed families who were members of both the status and the economic élites.

Within this group, the hierarchies of wealth and rank corresponded closely enough for the exceptions not to matter, at least before 1880. There may have been some poor dukes; but the majority were very rich indeed. Of the twenty-nine wealthiest landowners in Britain in 1883, twelve were dukes, a majority of their order, including the top five. Indeed, the richest of them all, Westminster, was promoted from his marquessate purely on the grounds of his Olympian wealth. Conversely, but again in accordance with the system, Disraeli, Salisbury, and Lansdowne refused dukedoms on the grounds that they lacked the resources to support the dignity. In general, it was widely accepted that the richer the members of the landed establishment were, the higher their status and titles were supposed to be. In 1873, there were 363 owners of 10,000 acres in England, of whom exactly one-half were peers. But of those who owned 30,000 acres, three-quarters were members of the House of Lords.[41] However the matter is approached, it was land that was the key to riches and status.

What of the connection between wealth and power? Again, it is very close, though not of quite the same kind. Essentially, the landed establishment was an economic élite, from whose ranks the power élite, both nationally and locally, was recruited. The likelihood of office is the most significant index of the relative power of any group and, in Britain before the 1880s, it was much more likely that grandees and gentry would hold office than any other group. They did not *have* to hold office, and many did not do so; but by virtue of their ownership of broad acres, members of the titled and genteel classes boasted an inherited right to compete for access to offices involving administrative duties and public service. Peers were part of the wealth élite because they were great landowners: they were also part of the power élite as hereditary legislators. In the same way,

most country gentlemen could, if they wanted to, become both JPs and MPs with a fair degree of ease and assurance. From land to power the line ran, and only very occasionally in the opposite direction, as with Disraeli who, having nearly got to the top of the greasy pole, was obliged to set himself up as a country gentleman. He was a member of the power élite drawn into the wealth élite; but in most cases, the former was recruited from the latter, and not the other way round.

The last fit, between status and power, follows both logically and evidentially from what has just been said. The status élite and the wealth élite were essentially the same people. In the main, the power élite was recruited from the wealth élite. Therefore it was also recruited from the status élite. Again, there was only very rarely an exact fit between dukes as Prime Ministers, peers as cabinet members, and baronets and gentry as MPs. But as a leisured class of high status, it was expected that members of the landed establishment would govern. That was part of the job of having no job. So, although Wellington was the only ducal Prime Minister after 1815, the majority of them came from the Lords rather than the Commons. Trollope's Duke of Omnium was not so much the exception that proves the rule as the ideal type. Most members of the Commons were in fact recruited from gentry, baronets, and relatives of peers. Being a peer was both a power and a status position. From land to status to power the line ran, and rarely the other way.

Until the 1870s, power, prestige, and property were thus exceptionally highly correlated in the patrician élite of the British Isles. The United Kingdom may have been the first industrial nation, but even in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, when Britain was the workshop of the world, it was the country house not the counting house that was still emphatically in charge. Yet if the British landed establishment remained so undisputedly in the ascendant domestically, how did its position compare with that of equivalent continental notabilities? Set beside the titled and landed élites of Europe, were the British patricians rich or poor, glamorous or shoddy, powerful or puny? These are questions that it is easy and necessary to pose; but formidably difficult to answer. For while every country in Europe possessed its own titled-cum-territorial élite, they differed so markedly in their patterns of wealth holding, their systems of status, their exercise of power, and their overall position, that exact comparison is virtually impossible. Nevertheless, to set the British landowning classes in proper perspective on the eve of their decline and fall, the effort must be made.

In terms of territory, it seems likely that the notables owned a greater proportion of the British Isles than almost any other élite

owned of almost any other country. At the very bottom of the scale, in European Russia, the holdings of the old territorial establishment, although they amounted to a massive 177 million acres, made up only 14 per cent of the total land area of the nation. In France, there was by the nineteenth century no such entity as a landed interest, less than 20 per cent of the country was actually owned by the old élite, and in 1885, there were fewer than 1,000 estates of 1,000 acres.[42] In Prussia, the *Junkers* owned perhaps 40 per cent of the land, but a large amount of this was in very small holdings of less then 1,000 acres. Likewise, in Spain, while 52 per cent of the country was covered by estates, much of it was made up of insubstantial plots. Compared with the landowning élites of these four countries, the British aristocracy was clearly pre-eminent. Indeed, it seems possible – but not certain – that it was the landowning classes only of Austria, Hungary, and Roumania that could rival the territorial dominance of the British patrician classes in their heyday.[43]

It also seems likely that the British gentry and grandees were, collectively speaking, the wealthiest of the European territorial élites. In part, this was because they came to the most profitable terms with the Industrial Revolution. Britain was, after all, the first nation to industrialize; the patricians themselves owned so much of the land surface; and they were more advantageously placed to exploit the minerals beneath than many continental owners.[44] As a result, there were also more very wealthy grandees. In France, there were hardly any estates in excess of 10,000 acres: a magnate like the Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Doudeauville simply could not compete with the super-rich magnificoes of Britain.[45] In Prussia, most holdings were less than 10,000 acres, and there were a mere five, after the emperor's own, that amounted to 100,000 acres each. Only in Eastern Europe were there to be found those vast accumulations, held by families like Sheremetev and Yusupov in Russia, and Esterhazy, Schwarzenberg, and Lichtenstein in Austria-Hungary, that rivalled, and occasionally surpassed in acreage, the massive empires of the Sutherlands, the Breadalbanes, and the Buccleuchs.[46]

But many of these great European agglomerations included land that was worthless, or was bearing exceptionally heavy debts. Continental agriculture was, in general, much less efficient than British farming, and in addition, many European landowners were far more severely encumbered than were the territorial classes across the Channel. Most *Junker* estates were very heavily mortgaged, and in Russia, chronic indebtedness was endemic.[47] But above all, the British patricians were more efficient and more ruthless in keeping their estates together. The combination of primogeniture and entail meant that family holdings usually passed intact from one generation

to another, and were not sub-divided each time there was a succession, as was the case in most of Europe.[48] In France, entail and primogeniture had been abolished at the time of the Revolution, and they disappeared in Spain in 1836. In Russia and Prussia, they were not outlawed, but were very rarely used, and even in Austria-Hungary, the practice was probably less widespread than in Britain.

As a status group, the British patricians were equally pre-eminent in continental terms. In France, titles had been abolished at the time of the Revolution, and were restored in the nineteenth century only for as long as the monarchy itself was restored: thereafter, they had no legal existence, and lacked the legitimating influence of a hereditary sovereign.[49] Elsewhere, by contrast, titles of nobility were so numerous that their prestige was never so great as in Britain. In Prussia, there were already 20,000 titled families in 1800. In Russia, some 20,000 ennoblements took place between 1825 and 1845, and in 1858 there were altogether 600,000 hereditary nobles.[50] In Austria-Hungary, there were 9,000 ennoblements between 1800 and 1914, which brought the total patrician population of the empire to 250,000. And in Italy, there was a massive usurpation and misuse of titles, with the result that there were some 12,000 aristocrats by 1906.[51] Compared with such numerous nobilities, the British peerage was a very small and very exclusive caste indeed, and, even if the baronetage and the landed gentry were also included, it remained an astonishingly tight and tiny status élite.

Why was the British nobility so much smaller, and in consequence, so much more illustrious? In part it was because titles, like territory, were usually sub-divided on the Continent on succession, whereas in Britain, the heir inherited everything. The result was that most European titles proliferated exponentially, and so became correspondingly commonplace and debased. In part, it was also because the system of ranks was, in virtually every other country, much more complex and elaborate than was the case in Britain, which was an added incentive to proliferation. And it was also because most European nations – with the significant exception of Britain – boasted a service nobility, which meant that honours were widely distributed to bureaucrats and military men of humble, non-landed background. As a result, most continental nobilities lacked the territorial base and thus the strict numerical constraints that were so characteristic of the British status stratum.[52] By comparison, the British titular élite was exceptionally difficult to get into, and landed resources were almost invariably necessary. It was thus probably the smallest and the most exclusive in Europe, and was certainly the most strongly based on territorial connection.

As a power élite, the British landed establishment was also unusually dominant, both at the centre and in the localities, in government and in administration.[53] In Belgium, the notables had ceased to provide the governing class by the 1830s. In France, they did not control the countryside, the national government, or the National Assembly. In Russia, most of the hereditary nobles stayed away from their estates, and spent their time in Moscow and St Petersburg. Apart from the army, they played little part in national or regional administration, preferring to leave it to the parvenu service nobility.[54] Only in Hungary and in Prussia were the grandees and gentry powerful in ways that invited comparison with the British governing class. There, too, they dominated the localities, monopolized the upper houses of both legislatures, and played a major part in government, in the civil service, and in the army. But they did so in collaboration with a non-patrician service élite of which there was no British equivalent, and in each country, the notables were ultimately the subordinate partners in conservative and essentially absolutist regimes.[55]

These continental comparisons are necessarily vague, tentative, and speculative. But some striking conclusions emerge nevertheless. Compared with the titled and territorial classes of Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, and Russia, the British landed élite was more wealthy, more exclusive, and more powerful. And even compared with the more robust notabilities of Prussia, Roumania, and Hungary, it was probably richer, was certainly more exclusive, and exercised its power in a significantly different way. Above all, it was the preponderance of land in the British case that most stands out. It gave them so much wealth and such territorial pre-eminence. It was virtually impossible for a non-landed person to obtain a peerage.[56] And it was the landed élite, not a separate service élite, that was in control of public affairs. In no other country in Europe were wealth, status, and power so highly correlated or so territorially underpinned. In addition, the British landed establishment had survived the revolutions of 1789 and 1848 unscathed, while other nobilities had been abolished and outlawed or had suffered an immense blow to their pride and prestige. In European terms, the British patricians were almost certainly the most illustrious and class conscious of them all.

But were they aware of this? Were they themselves conscious that they belonged to what was, before the 1880s, an unrivalled élite, not merely in domestic terms, but in comparative terms as well? How – to pose the question in another way – do we move from the objective circumstances of highly correlated wealth, status, and power, to the subjective feelings of class consciousness, most memorably described by E. P. Thompson as being when 'some men, as a result of common experience (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the

identity of their interests as between themselves and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs'?[57] For any social group, the notion of subjective consciousness is even more difficult to deal with than that of objective circumstances, and the British patrician élite is no exception. In terms of wealth, status, and power, the landed establishment may have existed objectively. But subjectively, what sense of themselves and of their order did these people actually share? And what, more negatively, were the limits to and constraints upon such feelings?

In the first place, there were very real limits to what they actually knew about themselves and their class. Even as individuals, many of them did not know how rich they were, how much land they owned, how many titles they possessed, or who all their ancestors were. Like all amateurs, they never knew as much as the experts – even about themselves. And so it inevitably followed that they knew even less in detail about the collective circumstances of their order. When Lord Derby pressed for a government inquiry into the ownership of the land of the British Isles in the 1870s, he was convinced that the notables did not hold much of it, and was much surprised to learn that they did.[58] In the same way, very few grandees actually knew just how many peers sat in the Lords, or precisely how many members of the Commons were part of the patrician élite. The danger, for the historian, in recovering objective circumstances with any real degree of precision, is that it gives the misleading impression that, because this is what we know about them now, this was also what they knew about themselves, then. But that is rarely if ever the case.

In addition, the range of circumstances that these broad categories of wealth, status, and power encompassed was quite astonishingly wide and varied, and this was bound to inhibit any sense of class solidarity and class consciousness. As W. L. Burn once rightly put it, 'the Duke of Omnium and the small squire were half a world apart', and this was something that even the most ignorant patrician could scarcely fail to know.[59] The marginal landowner, eking out his existence on £1,000 a year, was a very different person from the Duke of Westminster, jogging along on his income of nearly £1,000 a day. An untitled gentleman, even if recorded in *Burke*, was in no sense as glamorous as the Duke of Marlborough. And a country squire who did not sit on the bench, and entertained no parliamentary ambitions, was hardly in the same league as the Duke of Devonshire. In addition, there were great variations across the British Isles. In Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, there was a religious divide between owners and tenants that did not exist in England. There were more big estates in Scotland and in Ireland than in

England and Wales. And there were differences between those owners who had access to non-economic resources and those who did not, those who were indebted and those who were unencumbered.

Moreover, there were competing and conflicting reference groups to which landowners might belong. Anglican or Catholic, Whig or Tory, Irish or English, Free Trader or Protectionist: these were divisions where aristocrats took different sides, so that sometimes, over some issues, they had more in common with other people from different social groups than they had with people from the same background as themselves. Bernard Cracroft caught this well in his account of patrician divisions in the House of Commons:

> A and B are cousins, landowners, country members. Both are Etonians, both Guardsmen, both have married daughters of peers. But one is a member of the Carlton, the other of Brooks's. One is a Protectionist, the other a Free Trader. One hugs primogeniture, the other thinks that land should be as saleable as a watch. One is an enthusiastic defender of the Protestant faith in Ireland, the other thinks that the Irish Church would be best swept off the face of the earth.[60]

With the British aristocracy, as with any such group, economic and social categories cannot be effortlessly elided into political parties or monolithic class consciousness. Over Home Rule or death duties or any major issue that affected the future of the gentry and grandees, they were invariably divided as to how to respond.

Even so, during their heyday, and also during their century of decline, the most important reference group for most notables was that they belonged – or had once belonged – to the British landed establishment. For most of the time, they had much more in common with each other (whatever their occasional and sometimes abiding differences) than with any other social group (whatever their occasional and sometimes abiding similarities). The forces making for unity of perception and of interest were very much stronger than the forces making for diversity, and they were also much more powerful than those moulding and unifying any other class. As a result, the gentry and grandees almost invariably shared the same cast of mind and unspoken assumptions; they looked at the rest of the people and the rest of the world in a similar way; and they boasted what Joseph Schumpeter rightly called a 'simplicity and solidity of social and spiritual position', a simplicity and a solidity that no other class in Britain could equal or rival.[61] Even when they sold their estates, or when aristocratic rebels publicly rejected their class, they almost invariably behaved in ways that made their ori-

gins, their status, and their view of themselves and the world abundantly plain.

But if the British patricians were indeed conscious of themselves as a class, even in decline and decay, what exactly did that class consciousness consist of? To begin with, most of them were roughly but rightly aware that they belonged – or that their forebears had belonged – to an élite of wealth, status, and power. This was rarely more than a general impression; but it was sufficiently plausible, powerful, and pervasive for them to know this meant that they were – or had once been – God's elect. In the words of M. L. Bush, 'landownership, a ruling function, shared ideals and a sense of being socially distinguished from the commonality, made [them] aware that they belonged to the same social order.'[62] They possessed, in short, a collective awareness of inherited and unworked-for superiority. In this very general sense, class consciousness brought together and articulated, subsumed and transcended, great wealth, high status, and supreme power. Hence the study of objective circumstances is also the best way into the rediscovery and evocation of subjective consciousness. For class consciousness was, essentially, the limited but real subjective awareness of the objective circumstances of wealth, status, and power.

In addition, the British patricians were highly conscious of themselves, their families, and their order *in time*. More than any other class, they knew where they had come from, they knew where they were, and they hoped and believed they were going somewhere. This was what Edmund Burke meant when he spoke of 'partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born.'[63] The walls of their houses were adorned with ancestral paintings; the pages of *Burke* and *Debrett* catalogued and chronicled their forebears; their homes were usually in the style of an earlier period. They planted trees that only their descendants would see in full splendour; they granted building leases for ninety-nine years in the confident hope that their grandchildren would enjoy the reversion; and they entailed their estates so as to safeguard them for as long as possible. It may not have mattered much in 1964 to Harold Wilson that he was the fourteenth Mr Wilson; but it no doubt mattered a great deal to Sir Alec Douglas-Home that he was the fourteenth earl.

But as well as being conscious of themselves over time, the British patricians were also the prisoners of time. Whether they liked it or not, whether they knew it or not, and whether they fully understood it or not, it is clear that from the 1880s onwards, their circumstances and consciousness changed and weakened. What is more, the rate of change varied: the very rich survived better and longer than the less well off; the exact chronology of the undermining of wealth, the erosion of status, and the attenuation of power was different in each case; and the dilution of class consciousness, a sense of collective identity, and corporate confidence was subject to a different time scale again. By investigating the decline and fall of the British notables and nobles over one hundred years, it is possible to see the process almost at full stretch. It is the story of the unmaking of the British upper classes, a story that most appropriately begins in the 1880s.

iv. The 1880s: A Troubled Decade

From an international, no less than from a domestic standpoint, it is clear that the members of the titled and genteel classes of Britain were still undeniably in charge and on top in the 1870s. In terms of preferment and prestige, power and property, pride and panache, their position was essentially unrivalled. Yet within the space of one hundred years, they were to be eclipsed as the economic élite, undermined as the most glamorous social group, and superseded as the governing class. Given the strength and resilience of their position during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, their subsequent decline and fall will by definition take some explaining – indeed it will take more explaining than is necessary in the case of other less robust élites.[64] It was no simple or straightforward matter. They took an unconscionable time a-dying. There was no single cause of death. But there was, at least, a turning point. For it is clear that the 1880s were the most troubled decade – for the nobles and notables of Britain, no less than for the titled and territorial classes of Europe – since the 1840s or the 1790s.

Across the entire Continent, and among the most illustrious names, there were unmistakable indications that all was not well with the old order. The Lieven mansion on Morskaya in St Petersburg, close to the Winter Palace, where the family had lived for centuries, was rented out to the Italian government. For the same reason, the Hotel de Talleyrand in the Rue Saint-Florentin in Paris was taken over by the Rothschilds. And the Stolberg Palace in Berlin, belonging to a high-ranking family of imperial counts, was sold up to pay gambling debts, and became the grandest hotel in the capital. In France, the Marquis Boni de Castellane married an American heiress, Anna Gould, who brought with her a fabulous, life-restoring dowry of three million pounds. And in Italy, the proliferation of hereditary titles had been so widespread, so corrupt, and so uncontrolled, that the Royal College of Arms was reconstituted in a vain attempt to authenticate and to restrict these cheapened claims to aristocracy and nobility.[65]

These examples are but the merest token of a much broader and deeper patrician malaise, which had appropriately broad and deep causes. The first was the sudden and dramatic collapse of the agricultural base of the European economy, partly because of the massive influx of cheap foreign goods from North and South America and the Antipodes, and partly because of the final and emphatic burgeoning of the fully fledged, large-scale, and highly concentrated industrial economy. The result was that the rural sector was simultaneously depressed and marginalized, and the consequences for the essentially agrarian élite of European landowners were inevitably severe. Across the Continent, agricultural prices and rentals collapsed. In France, the value of land fell by a quarter between 1880 and 1890. In Russia, a special land bank was established in 1885 to prop up the tottering estates of the nobility, but as Chekhov's plays so eloquently demonstrate, it did so with very limited success. And in Prussia, a fund was created by state legislation to take over bankrupt *Junker* holdings. By the end of the decade, many estates were dangerously over-mortgaged, and many *Junkers* were resorting to extraordinary measures of economy and retrenchment, including more rigorous family limitation and – in sheer desperation – sending their daughters into convents.[66]

For the titled and territorial classes, the political and social consequences were also severe. Agricultural depression spawned peasant revolts and nationalist movements in each of the four great polyglot countries: Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and the British Isles. The increasingly prosperous and assertive middle class shaded imperceptibly into the new and fabulously rich international plutocracy. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, these men were no longer satisfied with mere wealth: they craved both the political power and the social recognition to which they believed their fortunes entitled them.[67] At the same time, urban and industrial growth brought into being a new world of strikes and riots, socialists and anarchists, and working-class political parties. Throughout Europe, there were widespread demands for extensions of the franchise, which were to be conceded during the next two decades, and which fundamentally changed the nature of political life and the balance of political power. In future, it would be numbers and people and organization that would matter, rather than nobles and patricians and patronage. The age of the masses had superseded the age of the classes. At the same time that the economy became global, politics became democratized.

The result was the gradual eclipse of the old order as the dominant force in the legislature and in government. Many patricians could no longer afford a career in public life; many now found it impossible to

get themselves elected to public office. In Germany, the National Liberal Party contained only a fraction of businessmen in 1878, but many more ten years later. In France, the nobility had constituted one-half of the Assembly in 1871, but only one-fifth by 1889.[68] At the same time, the growth of collectivism meant a decline in individual freedom, and also that the nobles and the gentry could no longer dominate the state in the way they once had. As Max Weber rightly noted, bureaucracy was as much the enemy of aristocracy as was democracy or depression.[69] Perhaps, too, as Joseph Schumpeter saw later, the flowering of formal, belligerent, jingoistic imperialism was connected with the need of the old titled and territorial classes to indulge overseas their atavistic longings for plunder, for glory, and for dominion, at a time when their wealth, their status, and their power, and thus their sense of purpose and identity, were being so massively undermined at home.

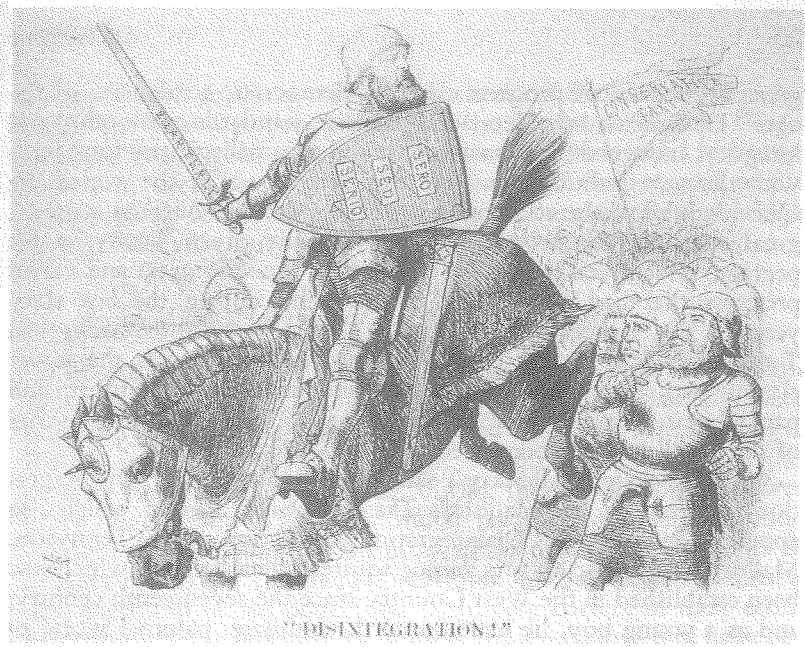
In retrospect, at least, it is clear that these major shifts in the balance of economic, social, and political power portended the end of the old aristocracies of nineteenth-century Europe. And what was true for the Continent in general was equally true of the British Isles in particular. There, too, the world-wide collapse in agricultural prices meant that estate rentals fell dramatically, and that land values plummeted correspondingly. As a result, the whole territorial basis of patrician existence was undermined, and the easy confidences and certainties of the mid-Victorian period vanished for ever. Land was no longer the safest or securest form in which to hold wealth, and this was to remain so for the next seventy years – a long time, even for aristocrats conditioned to take the long view. Some, indeed, found their financial position so precarious that they were forced to begin selling their assets, and this, too, was very much the shape of things to come during the next half-century and beyond. At the same time, prodigious, unprecedented plutocratic fortunes were now being made around the world in business, in industry, and in finance, which equalled and soon surpassed the wealth of all but the greatest of the super-rich magnates.

Such was the challenge to landed wealth that was gathering momentum in Britain during the 1880s. Of course, in the heyday of the gentry and grandees, land had not only meant wealth, it had also meant power. But during this troublesome decade, it was people, rather than property, who wrested the political initiative. The passing of the Third Reform Act in 1884–5 tilted the balance of the constitution more markedly and more irrevocably than ever away from notables to numbers, and patrician dominance of the lower house soon vanished for ever as a result. In England, there were unprecedented attacks on the great ground landlords, and wide-

spread demands for leasehold enfranchisement. In Wales, there was extensive rural unrest culminating in a tithe war. In Scotland, the crofters were in open rebellion against their landlords. In Ireland, there were demands for the extinction of landlordism and for Home Rule. Everywhere, the owners of land were on the defensive. Even in the counties, the reform of local government meant that the 'rural houses of lords' were swept away. And at the centre, the end of *laissez-faire*, and the rapid growth of government, portended the eclipse of patrician-dominated administration.

These challenges to landed power which became so forceful during the 1880s were accompanied by equally formidable threats to landed status. In the localities, county society was irrevocably weakened, many owners were forced to let or close their houses, and fox-hunting ceased to be a preponderantly patrician pastime. In London, high society was diluted (or, as some claimed, polluted) by the advent of vulgar international plutocrats, American multimillionaires, and Jewish adventurers, who brutally and brashly bought their way in. For the first time, peerages were now regularly bestowed on men of non-landed background, and the honours system ceased to be territorially based, as it had to accommodate and reward the massively expanded imperial and domestic non-patrician bureaucracy. Significantly, it was in that very decade that two new publications began, which between them sounded the death-knell of the old, tiny, concentrated élite of landed wealth, landed power, and landed status: the *Directory of Directors* and *Who's Who*. In the new and more complex world of the late nineteenth century, there was no longer only one undisputed, aristocratic élite.

Internationally and domestically, the writing seemed plainly on the wall for the noble and landowning classes during the 1880s. In Britain, there were three upper-class pessimists who most perceptively read the signs of the times. The first was Lord Salisbury, who in January 1883 published his last essay in the *Quarterly Review* entitled, significantly, 'Disintegration.'[70] It was an outspoken attack on the evils of unbridled democracy, which seemed poised to overwhelm the propertied, patrician polity in which he so ardently believed, and to the maintenance of which he had devoted his public life. Salisbury deeply distrusted the hasty clamour of the popular will, and feared that government in the interests of the working class was the inevitable prelude to anarchy and despoliation. The Whigs who remained in the Liberal party were now, he averred, quite ineffectual. The landowners in Ireland were at the mercy of a disloyal government and a rapacious tenantry. And the House of Lords was the object of almost unprecedented popular attack. The war of the classes, Salisbury concluded, could not be long delayed, and he was all too fearful as to who would be the victor.



3. 'Disintegration!' *Punch*, 27 Oct. 1883.

Three years later, Salisbury's gloom was echoed by another commentator, who was equally out of sympathy with what he regarded as an increasingly radical and hostile world. Although he was never a major landowner in his own right, Alfred Lord Tennyson spoke as much as Salisbury with the authentic voice of the landed classes, and especially for the squires and minor gentry.[71] His socially ambitious grandfather had built up a modest accumulation in Lincolnshire, and eventually became a fully-fledged country gentleman at Bayons Manor. But his eldest son, Tennyson's father, was left only a small amount of property, and the main estate passed instead to his younger brother, the poet's uncle, and thence to his descendants, the poet's cousins. Tennyson remained obsessed by this disinheritance all his life, and was constantly torn between the competing claims of revenge and emulation. He was proud to use the family coat of arms. He set himself up, on his poet's earnings, as a country gentleman in the Isle of Wight and in Surrey. He behaved very grandly when he was awarded his peerage in 1884. And he regarded squirearchy and hierarchy as the ideal form of social organization.

In late 1886, he poured out his feelings about the future fate of the landowners in 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After', an impassioned lament for the gradual passing of the old social order to which he was so attached, and an attack even more fervent than Salisbury's on the

general doctrine of progress and the democratic tendencies of the age.[72] He lamented the demise of patrician standards of morality and integrity, mourned the passing of the old paternalism, and took issue with the new politics of vulgar demagoguery. On the eve of the Queen's Jubilee, the strident tone of its anguished outrage caused a great stir, and Gladstone, who had actually given Tennyson his peerage, felt moved to reply, pointing out the very great and varied progress that had been made by mankind during the last sixty years.[73] But ironically, his riposte served merely to strengthen Tennyson's case: partly because it showed that it was the lower classes, rather than the patricians, who had benefited most; and partly because even Gladstone was forced to admit that, 'for a series of years', all had not been well for the landlords.

While 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After' is, essentially, 'Disintegration' in verse, W. H. Mallock's *The Old Order Changes*, which also appeared in 1886, is 'Disintegration' as fiction. Like Tennyson, Mallock was the scion of a minor squirearchical family, which had been established in the West Country since the seventeenth century, and as a young boy, he had adored the intimate, paternal world of the Devonshire gentry.[74] But by the 1880s, he had become convinced that this entire way of life was on the brink of dissolution. In *The Old Order Changes*, he tried to explain why 'aristocracy, as a genuine power, as a visible fact in the world, may not yet be buried, perhaps; but it is dead.' As in his other books, Mallock assembled a country-house party of rather stock characters, who discuss contemporary problems in the manner of Plato's dialogues. The central figure, Carew, is clearly Mallock himself. He is heir to a decayed estate in the West Country, and believes passionately in 'our birthright of rule and leadership'. But, although he is only thirty-five, he feels he has outlived his time. 'If', he remarks at the outset, 'our landed aristocracy ever come to an end, my England will have come to an end also.'[75]

The remainder of the book suggests that the end is indeed not that far off. The general tone of the ensuing discussions is one of 'doubt and bewilderment.' Everywhere, it seems, the influence of the old aristocracy has declined. Their economic might has been eroded and their social standing has diminished. They are no longer the leaders of the nation or of the localities. The estates of many landowners are so heavily mortgaged that they have become, essentially, the hangers-on of the bourgeoisie. High society is now dominated by the vulgar wealth of the new plutocracy. In the Commons, it is the middle classes who have become the dominant voice. The streets of London are swamped by socialist agitators, inciting the workers to riots and revolution, who are motivated by no more than personal

bitterness and social envy, and who seek to abolish the House of Lords and outlaw primogeniture. For the representatives of a class so strongly aware of its superior status, its past glories, and its historic functions, these are terrible circumstances to endure, and terrible prospects to face. 'Anger, contemptuous amusement and blank despair' seem the only possible responses.[76]

v. Conclusion: The End of the Beginning

Of course, these three pieces of writing may be easily dismissed as early examples of that carefully cultivated genre of panic, persecution, and paranoia that have characterized the public utterances of the British aristocracy for the last one hundred years. Despite their gloomy forebodings, there was, during the decades that followed, much vigour and resolution, much resourceful resistance, much outright defiance, much adroit adaptation. Nevertheless, in the broader context of continental developments and domestic difficulties, there can be no doubt that they were correct in their central perception that – as Salisbury himself put it – 'things that have been secure for centuries are secure no longer.'[77] They did not understand in detail the economic, social, and political forces that were responsible; and they misjudged the speed at which these developments would work themselves out. But in their hunch that this was the beginning of the end for the traditional territorial classes, they were not mistaken. In the course of the next one hundred years, the lords of the earth would become strangers in their own lands, the stars of the firmament would cease to shine with such unrivalled brilliance, and the makers of history would become, at last and at length, its victims.

Beyond any doubt, the 1880s were the decade when this outcome first became a real and foreseeable possibility, and it is not coincidence that this was the very time when the upper-class pessimists began to complain in earnest, and when even those more robust grandees began to experience nagging doubts and intimations of mortality. In the very middle of that decade, on 23 August 1885, the fifteenth Earl of Derby recorded this entry in his diary:

> This day is the four hundredth anniversary of Bosworth – the foundation of our family greatness. It has been well maintained so far, through many vicissitudes: indeed, we never played a more considerable part than in the last generation, and are still fairly prominent in public affairs. As to wealth, we have more of it than at any former time: but that is the result of chance rather than our work. Will either last?[78]

4. Lord Derby by Harry Furniss.

During that disturbed and anxious decade, there were many such patricians who were peering into the future, and wondering and worrying what it would bring. It is now time for us to follow them on their journey down the marble steps of history into the light of common day.

PART ONE:

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY

Great people lived and died in this house;
Magistrates, colonels, Members of Parliament.
Captains and Governors, and long ago
Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne.
Some that had gone on Government work
To London or to India came home to die,
Or came from London every spring
To look at the may-blossom in the park . . .
But he killed the house; to kill a house
Where great men grew up, married, died,
I here declare a capital offence.

(W.B. Yeats, 'Purgatory', in S.F. Siegel (ed.), *Purgatory: Manuscript Materials Including the Author's Final Text by W.B. Yeats* (1986), pp. 78–9.)

2

THE EMBATTLED ELITE

The dawning of mass democracy [in 1884–5] brought into being a new sort of popular power which could, if it wished, make the possession of title, money and even land quite irrelevant.

(R. Lacey, *Aristocrats* (1984), p. 133.)

With the [House of] Lords' power of veto went all those claims to . . . leadership which had formerly belonged to the owners of great estates . . . . If Mr Asquith's Resolutions and his Parliament Bill meant anything, they meant that land's political power was on the wane . . . Away with it, and away with . . . aristocracy, too: it had become too old-fashioned to do its work.

(G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1970 edn.), pp. 40–1.)

From the early 1880s, landowners were attacked by politicians and land reformers in Parliament, in the press, and in a welter of literature on various aspects of 'the land question'.

(D. Reeder, 'The Politics of Urban Leaseholds in Late Victorian England', *International Review of Social History*, VI (1961), p. 413.)

Lloyd George began his political life attacking the landlords . . . His cause, the one programme he remained with throughout his life, was the destruction of the monopoly of land . . . The landlord – there was the enemy. Idle land in the hands of idle men.

(B. B. Gilbert, 'David Lloyd George: Land, the Budget, and Social Reform', *American Historical Review*, LXXXI (1976), pp. 1059, 1062, 1066.)

The [First World] War . . . changed the British aristocracy for ever . . . The belief . . . that proportionately more of their sons died than those of other classes was not just an arrogant illusion. It was true . . . Not since the Wars of the Roses had the English aristocracy suffered such losses as those which they endured during the Great War.

(A. Lambert, *Unquiet Souls: The Indian Summer of the British Aristocracy, 1880–1918* (1984), pp. 186, 188, 205.)

In 1880, the former Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, predicted that 'the politics of this country will probably for the next few years mainly consist in an assault upon the constitutional position of the landed interest.' By this, he meant both an attack on 'the system of government that now prevails in this country', and also on 'the principles upon which the landed property of this country should continue to be established.'[1] Had he lived a little longer, he would have been the unhappy witness to the widespread fulfil-

ment of both of these prophecies. The passing of the Third Reform Act in 1884–5, and the Liberal triumph over the House of Lords in the aftermath of the People's Budget of 1909, meant that the traditional aristocratic constitution was definitely brought to an end. At the same time, the grandees and gentry came under bitter attack because of their monopolistic territorial holdings. In England, Scotland, and Wales, the revival of the 'land question' generated unprecedented animosities and anxieties. And in Ireland, the sustained protests of the agrarian nationalists persuaded successive British governments that it was the landlords who were the greatest single cause of rural discontent, and that they should be investigated, regulated, and encouraged to disappear.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the patricians were obliged to adjust themselves for the first time to the unfamiliar and uneasy world of democratic politics and a mass electorate. The Reform measures of 1832 and 1867 had simply altered and adapted the old rural, oligarchic and proprietary system. But the Third Reform Act created a new and very different representational structure for the whole of Great Britain and Ireland, in which the cities and the suburbs were pre-eminent, and in which a working-class electorate possessed the dominant voice.[2] Nor was this the only way in which the Act undermined the old form of aristocratic politics. For the more representative and democratic the Commons became, the more anachronistic and unacceptable the House of Lords appeared by comparison. From 1880 onwards, every Liberal government found its legislative programme thwarted by the obstructive Conservative majority in the upper house, and the Lords rejection of Lloyd George's People's Budget precipitated a final confrontation between the elected and the hereditary chambers. The passing of the Parliament Act, two years later, did more than curb the peers' legislative veto: it also signified the end of landed society's political power.

As legislators the patricians were on the defensive: and as landowners they were no less embattled. A series of official inquiries, undertaken during the 1870s and 1880s, revealed for the first time the astonishing extent of their territorial monopoly and collective wealth. This, in turn, led to widespread demands for changes in the distribution and control of property, and for much heavier taxation of unearned incomes. At the same time, there was also an unprecedented upsurge in agrarian agitation and protest – in Wales, Scotland, and especially in Ireland. In many parts of the country, tenants turned against their landlords, frequently refused to pay their rents, and stridently demanded an end to the system of great estates. In Ireland, successive governments responded by curbing the powers of

the landlords, and by encouraging them to sell their holdings to their tenants. In the Scottish Highlands, the results were scarcely less momentous, and in England and Wales, the landowners feared that their turn would soon come. The culmination of this long drawn-out struggle came with Lloyd George's 'Land Campaign' of 1912–14, which briefly threatened to undermine the whole territorial basis of traditional landed society.

Disraeli's gloomy predictions were thus amply borne out by subsequent events. But not even he foresaw an even greater catastrophe lying over the twentieth-century horizon, by which so many members of the titled and genteel classes were to be consumed: the First World War. Despite the unsympathetic and vindictive treatment that they believed they had received at the hands of successive governments, the young patricians rushed to join the colours in the autumn of 1914. But the war itself brought death and bereavement in unexpected and unprecedented abundance, as cohorts of young notables were slaughtered on the fields of Flanders and killed on the beaches of Gallipoli. Not since the Wars of the Roses had so many aristocrats suffered so much violent death, and thereafter the landed classes were never the same again. Their self-confidence was permanently undermined by this military catastrophe, and they looked to the future with grief, with gloom, and with apprehension. Between 1880 and 1914, the world that they had been brought up to dominate and to control had emphatically turned against them. And between 1914 and 1918, it was turned completely upside-down.

i. The End of the Patrician Polity

For the first time in its modern history, the United Kingdom, in common with most western states, entered the realm of mass politics in the years from 1880 to 1914.[3] Reactionary aristocrats like Lord Eustace Cecil and Lord Salisbury believed that 'the full tide of democracy' had been flowing unabated since the passing of the Second Reform Act in 1867. But as the last quarter of the nineteenth century opened, Britain remained essentially a patrician polity. The electorate was restricted to one-third of all adult males, the vote was firmly attached to property, and the great territorial magnates still wielded significant influence in many county and borough constituencies.[4] And as the supreme embodiment of institutionalized aristocratic power and hereditary political privilege, the House of Lords retained the unchallenged right to veto virtually all legislation initiated in the Commons. Yet within thirty years, the balance of political power was changed dramatically and irrevocably – away from the patricians and towards the people. For the widening of the

5. 'The Old Story.' *Punch*, 26 Jan. 1884.

franchise in 1884–5, and the emasculation of the House of Lords in 1910–11, meant that the politics of deference had definitely ended, and that the politics of demos had emphatically arrived.

The first inklings that the future would see an increasingly 'beleaguered noblesse', overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers, and driven on to the political defensive, came with the massive Liberal victory in the general election of 1880. Like Disraeli, Lord Salisbury rightly saw this dramatic 'swing of the pendulum' as portending 'a serious war of [the] classes.' Gladstone's Midlothian Campaign had plumbed new depths of sensational demagoguery, and in the general election itself, he had promised (among other things) 'emancipation and reform' to wild and delirious crowds. The number of votes cast was greater than in any previous election, and more seats were contested than ever before.[5] Jittery grandees like Lord Brabourne feared that 'the devouring spirit of democracy' had already arrived, and that

it could not be led or controlled by traditional means. 'We can', observed Lord Warwick apprehensively, 'neither flatter demos nor bribe him.' Earl Percy was even more gloomy, and worried that recent developments amounted to 'a real, though not as yet complete, revolution'. And in essence he was right: for there was much more to come. As Frederick Calvert warned in 1880, the Liberal victory meant that 'all our institutions are on trial' – and in a way that had not been true for nearly half a century.[6]

Inevitably, this put the restructuring of the oligarchic constitution high on the agenda of public discussion and radical demand. No one had seriously expected the Second Reform Act of 1867 to be final, and in 1880 it was widely believed that Gladstone would soon extend the householder franchise from the boroughs to the countryside. Since this would involve a general election soon after, he preferred to bide his time. But in 1883, he passed the Corrupt Practices Act, which significantly limited the power of local constituency notables by curbing the sums that they could spend at election times, by precisely defining irregular and illegal conduct, and by imposing stiff penalties for infringement.[7] As such, this measure also drew renewed attention to the electoral system itself, and as the fourth year of Gladstone's administration opened, the demand for more general parliamentary reform gathered momentum. Within the cabinet, it was strongly urged by the two most radical members, Sir Charles Dilke and Joseph Chamberlain. During the winter of 1883–4, public meetings were held up and down the country at which motions in favour of reform were passed. And in January 1884, a deputation representing 240,000 delegates from every trade union in the land waited upon Gladstone himself.[8]

The outcome was two complementary measures passed in 1884 and 1885, which together made up the Third Reform Act.[9] The first was concerned with the substantial enlargement of the electorate, and essentially extended the householder and lodger franchise from the boroughs to the countryside. As a result, the voting population of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was increased from just above three million men in 1883 to nearly six million in 1885, the greatest numerical enlargement of any nineteenth-century reform act. The second measure was concerned with redistribution and with the redrawing of constituency boundaries. More than one hundred and fifty small borough seats were abolished throughout the British Isles, some were redistributed towards the counties, and even more in favour of large towns. The representation of Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dublin, and Belfast was significantly increased, and Greater London obtained thirty-nine extra seats. The old county divisions, which had each returned two mem-

bers, and the large boroughs, which had previously returned three, were done away with, and almost everywhere, single member constituencies were introduced instead.[10]

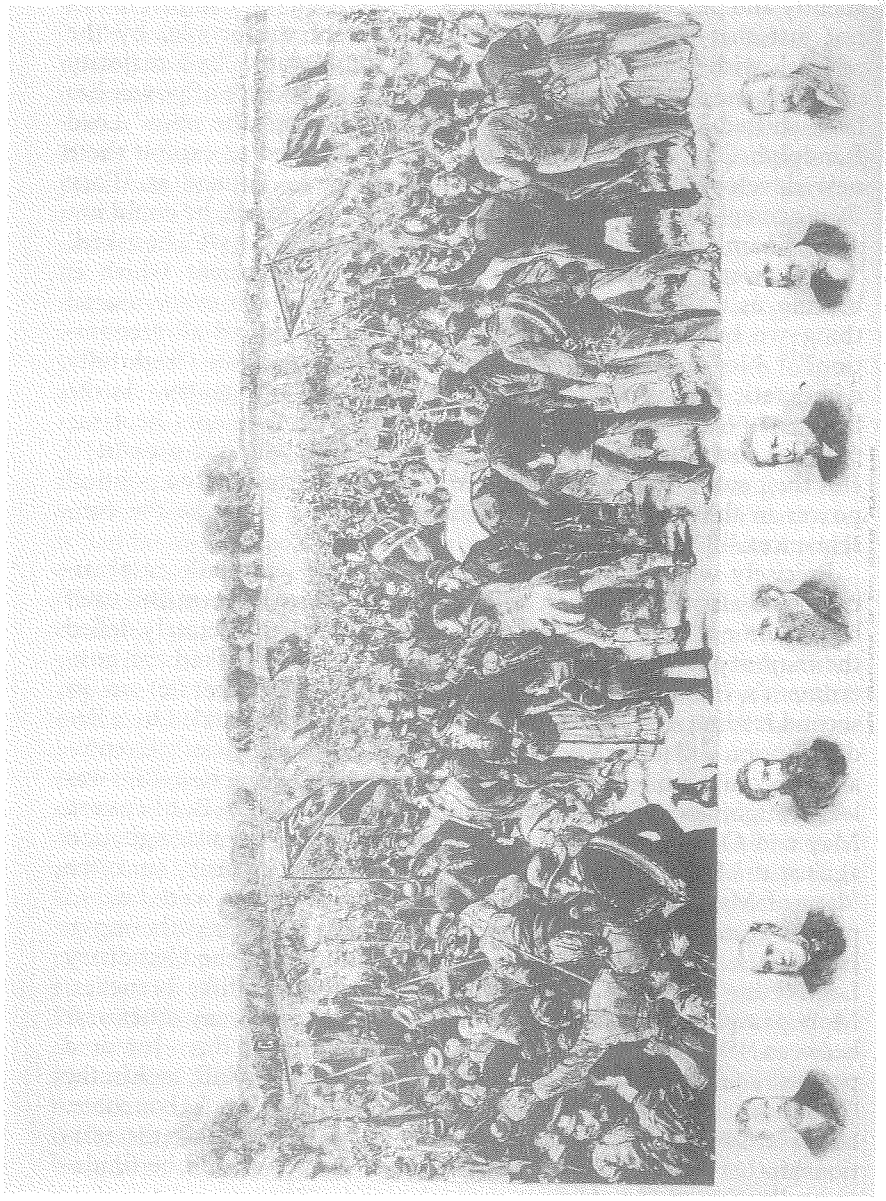
Of course, these measures did not bring – and were never intended to bring – universal adult suffrage for men, and they were constrained and compromised by many anomalies and anachronisms which were not fully swept away until the Fourth Reform Act of 1918.[11] But they did comprise 'the most substantial package of parliamentary reform in the nineteenth century'. And this 'pacific revolution' was dramatically and irreversibly in the direction of democracy. For the first time ever, the majority of men now enjoyed the vote – approximately 60 per cent. For the first time ever, the majority of the electorate was working class in its social background – certainly two-thirds, and perhaps as much as three-quarters by 1906. And for the first time ever, the landed interest was no longer acknowledged as being paramount – individuals were represented, rather than communities, and large towns at last received the number of MPs proportional to their populations. In short, the whole basis of the representational structure had been fundamentally changed: instead of being an essentially rural system, with urban modifications, it had became an overwhelmingly urban system, with limited rural exceptions.[12]

According to Lawrence Lowell, 'no considerable class in the country' was 'aggrieved' with the general outcome. But the solid gains for the middle and the working classes were very much at the expense of the traditional territorial order. In the countryside, the extension of the vote to agricultural labourers (and to small farmers in Ireland) meant that landed magnates had to work much harder than before to maintain their once dominant position.[13] The creation of many new suburban constituencies might be good for the Conservative party, but 'villa Toryism' was hardly a world in which most patricians felt at home or at ease. In terms of the number of seats and the number of voters, both Scotland and Wales were overrepresented, something that did not bode at all well for their Anglocentric landowners. And this was even more so in Ireland, which retained its 103 MPs when the number should have been reduced to 92, with the result that the native population could 'speak its mind' as never before.[14] By definition, a reform measure that benefited the agricultural labourers, the suburban bourgeoisie, the working-class residents of the inner cities, and the disenchanted inhabitants of the celtic fringe was bound to cause the landowners anxiety. It may not have been fully-fledged democracy; but as Neal Blewett rightly remarked, 'the post-1885 electoral order resembled that of 1960 more than that of 1832.' And as such, it spelt 'the end of the historic [i.e. patrician] House of Commons.'[15]

For all these reasons, Joseph Chamberlain was quite correct to welcome the Third Reform Act as 'a revolution which has been silently and peacefully accomplished.' As he went on to argue, it was not just that there was now 'government of the people, by the people', with 'the majority of the nation' represented 'by a majority in the House of Commons.' It was also that 'the centre of power has been shifted, and the old order is giving place to the new.' Lord Randolph Churchill took the same view, and tried to exploit these new developments by embracing something he defined as 'Tory Democracy'. But as a member of the old order himself, he could not share Chamberlain's confidence about the future. 'Are we', he asked, 'being swept along a turbulent and irresistible torrent which is bearing us towards some political Niagara, in which every mortal thing we know will be twisted and smashed beyond all recognition?'[16] No one knew. But it seemed clear that this 'frightfully democratic measure' boded ill for the grandees and gentry. As the Duke of Northumberland put it in 1908, 'Our ancestors kept the political power of the state in the hands of those who had property.' But their successors 'had destroyed that system, and placed political power in the hands of the multitude, and we must take the consequences.'[17]

Precisely what those consequences might be was made emphatically (and alarmingly) clear, even before the Third Reform Bill itself had become law. In July 1884, the House of Lords deliberately defied the majority in the freely elected Commons, and blocked the government's Franchise Bill (which dealt with the electorate) on its second reading, on the grounds that it was not accompanied by a Redistribution Bill (which would deal with the constituencies). Eventually, a compromise was reached, whereby the Franchise Bill was let through, and a Redistribution Bill soon followed.[18] But between May and October 1884 there was an outbreak of popular agitation against the Lords unprecedented in its scope and intensity since the 'days of May' in 1832. At least 1,500 public meetings were held to protest against the peers' action, including one monster gathering in Hyde Park. A People's League for the Abolition of the Hereditary Legislature was established in London, with over fifty branches. More pamphlets were produced on the subject than in any other year between 1880 and 1895. There were demands that three hundred peers should be created, to ensure the passage of the bill; and in the Commons in November, the radical MP, Henry Labouchere, obtained seventy-one votes in support of his motion that the relationship between the lower and the upper houses should be fundamentally altered.[19]

These attacks on the peers ranged from the constructively critical to the vituperatively hostile. The National Liberal Federation passed



6. 'The great meeting in Hyde Park to protest against the Lords rejection of the Franchise Bill.' *Illustrated London News*, 26 July

a resolution condemning 'the habitual disregard of the national will manifested by the House of Lords', and urged that there must be 'an end to the power of the House of Lords to thwart and deny the will of the people.'[20] John Bright proposed the substitution of powers of delay for powers of veto, so that the peers would no longer be a 'permanent obstacle to the will of the nation as represented and freely expressed in the House of Commons.' John Morley suggested that the Lords should be either 'mended or ended.' Joseph Chamberlain claimed that the upper house had obstructed reform for the last one hundred years, and that it was 'irresponsible without independence, obstinate without courage, arbitrary without judgement, and arrogant without knowledge.' One pamphleteer, J. M. Davidson, described the Lords as a 'chamber of robbers', a 'hospital for incurables.' But he was outdone by J. E. Thorold Rogers who, in phrases that anticipated Lloyd George, likened their lordships to 'Sodom and Gomorrah, and to the collective abominate of an Egyptian temple.'[21]

The successful passing of the Third Reform Act effectively brought this agitation to an end. But it had become abundantly clear that a substantial proportion of the Liberal party were bitterly opposed to a second chamber consisting of hereditary legislators of almost exclusively aristocratic background. As one pamphleteer had remarked in 1883, the passing of the First and Second Reform Acts had already called into being 'a power antagonistic to landed and hereditary pretensions', and the further widening of the Commons franchise should 'make the upper house tremble for its very existence.' Lord Rosebery agreed that with 'a strong, powerful and democratic assembly', the House of Lords 'could not remain as it was.'[22] In the general election of 1885, seventy Liberal MPs were returned who were pledged to abolish the upper house altogether. Between 1886 and 1890, Labouchere's annual motions attacking the power and the composition of the Lords regularly obtained more than one hundred and fifty supporters. And the National Liberal Federation made the 'mending or ending' of the upper house a permanent feature of its programme from 1888. As James Bryce perceptively observed, 'the question dealing with the second chamber has been so raised that it cannot again sleep.'[23]

For many Liberals, the passing of the Third Reform Act made the House of Lords seem even more anomalous in an increasingly democratic age. But the Conservative response was an ingeniously inventive attempt to justify the continued existence of the upper house in the new age of mass politics. To this end, Lord Salisbury developed what became known as the 'referendal theory', which sought to put the Lords on the side of democracy, rather than in opposition to it, by reworking traditional notions of feudal responsibility and paternal

concern.[24] According to this argument, the House of Lords was not the bastion of exclusive, aristocratic privilege, which its enemies accused it of being: it was on the side of the people, not against them. For if the Commons passed legislation that was unusually contentious, or that had not been fully discussed at the previous general election, then it was the duty of the Lords to reject it, and to compel a dissolution of Parliament, so that the matter could be referred to the electorate as a whole, for public debate and final decision. Viewed from this perspective, the powers of veto possessed by the Lords were not exercised self-interestedly to thwart the people's wishes, but were deployed democratically to ensure that the national will was properly ascertained.

This argument had been first developed at the time of the debates over Irish church disestablishment during the late 1860s. But it was only after Salisbury became leader of the Conservative peers in 1881, that it was fully worked out and articulated. Ever since the days of Wellington, the conventional wisdom had been that the Lords was essentially a leisured and revising chamber. The peers did not seek to thwart the will of the Commons, and governments did not resign if they were defeated in the upper house.[25] But the new referendal theory greatly inflated the pretensions of the peers, with the result that they were far more vigorous and active in the 1880s than they had been for many decades. As landowning legislators, they used their privileged position to amend and to delay Gladstone's Irish Land Bill of 1881, and his Arrears Bill of the following year. And Salisbury opposed Gladstone's Franchise Bill of 1884 on the grounds that it had not been explicitly discussed during the last general election. As he put it in the Lords, 'We are bound as guardians of their interests, to call upon the government to appeal to the people, and by the results of that appeal we will abide.'[26]

But despite the claim that the Lords was 'an instrument for reserving on all great and vital questions a voice for the electors and the people', the referendal theory was a doctrine at once dubious, disingenuous, and dangerous. It implied that the hereditary and unrepresentative peers could challenge the lower house in the name of the nation as a whole, and that the Lords possessed the right to force a dissolution on the Commons – both conventions quite unknown to the British constitution.[27] Moreover, it soon emerged that the only measures the Tory-dominated upper house felt bound to refer to the people were the radical proposals of successive Liberal governments, which showed up their claim of non-partisan concern for the national will as ridiculous humbug. And the admission that the voters were ultimately sovereign meant that the upper house would appear even more vulnerable and unrepresentative, if the electorate

ever upheld the verdict of the Commons rather than the veto of the Lords. The danger of proclaiming that the peers would never 'set themselves against the clear and deliberate judgement of the country' was that they might be forced to abide by that judgement, even when they did not like it. And this would be even more unfortunate if the country condemned the powers and the performance of the Lords themselves – as, between 1909 and 1911, it was effectively to do.[28]

The election of the last Gladstone government in 1892 meant that conflict was inevitably renewed between the Liberal Commons and the Tory Lords; and among the Prime Minister's more radical followers, there were hopes that the peers might now be 'mended or ended.' But in the aftermath of Home Rule, the Liberals were scarcely in a condition to confront the Lords head on, and the massive Whig defections meant that the traditional Conservative majority in the upper house had been even further enlarged.[29] In the autumn of 1893, the peers threw out Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill by an unprecedented majority of 419 to 41, and thereafter, they destroyed the Employers Liability Bill, and drastically altered the Parish Councils Bill. By early 1894, Gladstone told the Queen that there was 'not only a readiness, but even a thirst, for conflict with the House of Lords' in certain quarters of the party, and the Prime Minister himself looked forward to dissolving Parliament, and to fighting a general election on the issue of 'peers versus people'. But his years and his cabinet were against him, and he was forced to resign instead. Nevertheless, his very last speech in the Commons warned that the situation in which the Lords defied 'a deliberative assembly, elected by the votes of more than six million people', could 'not continue' indefinitely.[30]

When Lord Rosebery took over from Gladstone, in March 1894, he informed the Queen that at least half of his cabinet were definitely in favour of unicameral government, and he himself believed that 'with the democratic suffrage we now enjoy, a chamber so constituted [as the Lords] is an anomaly and a danger.' Indeed, to Rosebery, who had spent all his public life in the upper house, the prospect of solving the problem of the peers was far more appealing than vainly trying to give Home Rule to Ireland. But in this matter as in most others, the new Prime Minister lacked the will to act. The National Liberal Federation urged him to introduce legislation for 'the abolition of the House of Lords veto'.[31] But he showed no inclination to do so, and merely asked the Commons to propose resolutions proclaiming the preponderant authority of the lower house – something that they conspicuously failed to do. The cabinet was divided between reforming or abolishing the Lords,

ministers were more interested in death duties and Home Rule, and by January 1895, the issue had been effectively dropped. In the upper house, the Duke of Devonshire taunted Rosebery with displaying 'so much hesitation, so much doubt, so much vacillation', and during the course of the general election held later that year, he was the only leading Liberal who mentioned the subject at all.[32]

In the short run, the Lords' successful rejection of Home Rule in 1893, which was overwhelmingly endorsed by the victory of the Conservatives and their Unionist allies at the polls in 1895, provided ample vindication for Salisbury's referendal theory.[33] The fact that Gladstone did not enjoy a parliamentary majority among English MPs meant the Lords could plausibly present themselves as the more accurate barometer of public opinion. And according to Salisbury, they were further justified in rejecting Home Rule because such a major alteration to the constitution should not become law without full national discussion and electoral assent:

> The second chamber . . . exists . . . for the purpose of insisting on delay, and on an appeal to the people whenever an accidental, temporary and unreal advantage is to be used for the purpose of permanently modifying the constitution . . . We quite acknowledge that the House of Lords must submit to the will of the nation, but we must have the will of the nation clearly ascertained.

By the end of the decade, Salisbury had come to regard the Lords as the last line of defence against the radical tyranny of single chamber government. If future attempts were made to undermine 'the integrity of the Empire or . . . any of our vital institutions', without 'the full and undoubted assent of the people', he felt confident that 'the resistance of the House of Lords' could safely be relied upon. Indeed, it was Salisbury's belief that 'no political force exists in the country which can overwhelm it.'[34]

Thus equipped, with a massive majority in the upper house, with the inflated pretensions of the referendal theory, and with the successful precedent of Home Rule rejection, the patrician leadership of the Conservative party regarded the sweeping Liberal victory at the polls in January 1906 with relative equanimity. As Balfour proudly boasted later that year, whether 'in office or out of office', the Unionists would 'continue to control the destinies of this great empire' from their lofty and impregnable citadel in the House of Lords.[35] And as in the 1880s and 1890s, they still claimed to do so *in the name of the people*. For the Unionists refused to acknowledge the massive Liberal majority in the Commons as an unambiguous expression of the national will. Following his uncle's referendal doctrine, Balfour insisted that the Lords existed, 'not to prevent the

people of this country having the laws they wish to have', but to see that those laws were not 'the hasty and ill-considered offspring' of what he dismissed as 'one passionate election.' As he explained to Lord Lansdowne, the leader of the Unionist peers, it was the duty of the upper house to make 'serious modifications in important government measures.' And Balfour believed that the Lords 'may come out of the ordeal strengthened rather than weakened.'[36]

Put more bluntly, this meant that the peers set about sabotaging the Liberal government's legislative programme.[37] But they did so in a manner that was acutely (and self-interestedly) selective. They did not reject measures that directly benefited the working classes, such as the Trade Disputes Act of 1906 and the Factory and Workshops Act of the following year. Instead, they concentrated their opposition on measures that were not generally popular or of only marginal interest. In 1906, they threw out the Plural Voting Bill, and so modified the Education Bill that the government was forced to withdraw it. Thus directly but deviously defied, the Liberals were unsure what to do. The cabinet, like Rosebery's, was divided between those who wanted to end the Lords' veto, and those who wanted to reform its composition. It was too soon to call another general election, and in any case, neither the Education Bill nor the Plural Voting Bill were sufficiently emotive issues on which to base a 'peers versus people' campaign. In the end, the Prime Minister, Campbell-Bannerman, confined himself to warning the Lords and assuring the Commons that 'a way must be found, a way will be found, by which the will of the people, expressed through their elected representatives in this House, will be made to prevail.'[38]

But it was not at all clear how this should be brought about. Some Liberals favoured a drastic reform of the Lords' composition, which would eliminate its Conservative majority and hereditary structure. Others, including Campbell-Bannerman, thought it more politic to adopt John Bright's suggestion, and reduce its powers of veto. In June 1907, the Prime Minister proposed a resolution in the Commons, which urged that the power of the Lords 'should be so restricted by law as to secure that within the limits of a single parliament, the final decision of the Commons must prevail.'[39] The motion was passed by a majority of 432 to 147, but nothing substantial was accomplished, as the Lords subsequently rejected bills concerning evicted tenants in Ireland and smallholdings and land values in Scotland. The replacement of Campbell-Bannerman as Prime Minister by Asquith in the spring of 1908 did not ease the Liberals' plight. Later that year, the Lords threw out the Licensing Bill, and so modified a second Education Bill that once more the government was forced to withdraw it. By the autumn, the prospects seemed

bleak. 'The session is spoilt', recorded Lord Carrington, one of the few great landowners still loyal to Liberalism. 'Balfour and the Lords are masters of the situation.'[40]

It was in this context, of a government visibly losing ground in the country, in large measure because of its inability to carry a substantial part of its legislative programme, that Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, devised his famous People's Budget of 1909.[41] There was no intention, at least initially, of provoking the Lords into rejecting it. Faced with the need to raise unprecedented sums to finance Old Age Pensions and to pay for the cost of eight new Dreadnoughts, the Chancellor had no choice but to increase old taxes, and devise new ones. Taxation on alcohol, tobacco, motors and petrol was increased. Death duties were raised to unprecedented levels, and supertax was introduced for the first time. And there were a series of new exactions on land: a 20 per cent tax on the unearned increment of land values; an annual duty of one halfpenny in the pound on the capital value of undeveloped land; a 10 per cent reversion duty on the benefits to lessors at the termination of leases; and a mineral rights duty of one shilling in the pound on mining royalties. In addition, there was to be a complete survey and valuation of all land throughout the country. This was not just a budget designed to raise money from the rich: it was the landed rich who were its principal target and victim.[42]

By latter-day standards, these taxes were relatively mild, they raised less money than they cost to collect, and they were repealed in 1920. But in the summer of 1909, most landowners reacted with self-righteous indignation and outraged incredulity. Among patrician politicians, Balfour condemned the budget as 'vindictive, inequitable, based on no principle', while Lansdowne described it as 'a monument of reckless and improvident finance.' Lord Rosebery, long since a Conservative in all but name, denounced it as 'not a Budget but a Revolution, a social and political revolution of the first magnitude.'[43] Great landowners publicly paraded their new-found poverty, and made it plain that others would suffer, too. Lord Sherborne gave notice that he would be cutting his estate expenditure, because 'super-taxation' necessitated 'super-economy.' Lord Onslow told his tenants that he would have to dismiss all directly employed labourers, and put work out to contract instead. And the dukes made a series of speeches that were especially imprudent. Beaufort wanted the Liberal politicians put in 'the middle of twenty couple of dog hounds.' Rutland condemned them as 'piratical tatter-demalions.' And Buccleuch announced that he would be cancelling his annual subscription of one guinea to the Dumfreis-shire football club.[44]

Even by their supporters, these patrician interventions were widely regarded as unhelpful, unfortunate, and embarrassing. One junior Tory MP, William Joynson-Hicks, 'wished the dukes had held their tongues, every one of them.' But for Lloyd George, these landed laments were a heaven-sent opportunity for him to pillory the whole aristocratic order, and he did so with a bravura display of vituperative demagoguery and memorable phrase-making. He had already dismissed the House of Lords, not as 'the watchdog of the people', but as 'Mr Balfour's poodle.'[45] At Limehouse, in June 1909, he depicted the landowners as idle, greedy, parasitical, self-interested profiteers, as men who enjoyed wealth they did not create, while begrudging help to those less fortunate whose labours had helped to make them rich. 'Oh these dukes', he sighed, 'how they oppress us.' Three months later, in Newcastle, he was even more scathing. Who was governing this country, he asked, the people or the peers? How could 'five hundred . . . ordinary men, chosen accidentally from among the unemployed' override 'the judgement of millions of people who are engaged in the industry which makes the wealth of the country?' The Lords, he concluded, turning Rosebery's words on their head, 'may decree a revolution, but the people will direct it.'[46]

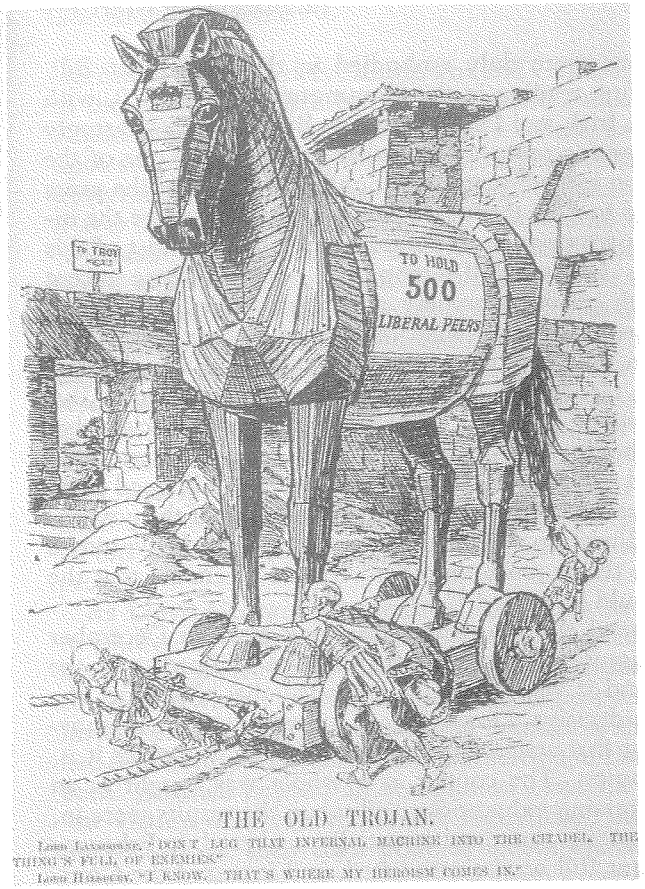
These speeches enraged the peers, upset the King, and dismayed many of Lloyd George's cabinet colleagues. To describe the House of Lords as five hundred men drawn randomly from the unemployed was as inaccurate as it was unfair: many of its members were both distinguished and hard-working. But there were enough peers who were idle and irresponsible for the label to stick. And at a time when unemployment was one of the great issues of the day, and when it was still widely believed that men were out of work because of their own faults of character, it was a brilliant touch to liken the noblest men in the land to the residuum of wastrels and loafers. By reacting as they did to his budget, the patricians played into Lloyd George's hands. They allowed him to capture the rhetorical initiative, and to depict them as greedy, effete, self-centred anachronisms, whose only concern was with the size of their own pockets, rather than with the national interest or the well-being of the people. More successfully even than Joseph Chamberlain, Lloyd George had toppled the peers from their lofty eminence of invulnerable superiority and effortless assurance. After Limehouse, the House of Lords was never quite the same again. At best, its inmates were emperors whose clothes seemed more than a little threadbare.[47]

Thus insulted and provoked, the Lords decided to reject the budget in November 1909. Although it was against all precedent for the peers to veto a money bill, they did so by 350 votes to 75. And when Lansdowne moved its rejection, he did so in explicitly referendal terms: 'That this House is not justified in giving its consent to the

Bill until it has been submitted to the judgement of the country.'[48] But the argument that the Lords was compelled to refer it to the people because it was a piece of punitive social legislation improperly masquerading as a budget failed to convince. As Asquith observed in the Commons, the peers had rejected the Finance Bill 'not because they love the people, but because they hate the Budget.' And it was an action as reckless as it was shortsighted. For the rejection of the budget made the destruction of the Lords' veto virtually inevitable. But very few Tory peers counselled moderation. One of them, Lord St Aldwyn, felt that 'for the Lords to reject a budget because it hits the "classes" unfairly would . . . give the government a really strong case against the Lords in the country.' And Balfour of Burleigh agreed. 'My Lords', he warned, with what turned out to be ominous prescience, 'if you win, the victory can at most be a temporary one. If you lose, you have altered the position, the power, the prestige, the usefulness of the House.'[49]

Since the government was unable to carry its financial legislation, there was no alternative but to dissolve Parliament, and in January 1910 a general election was fought, explicitly on the issue of the budget and the Lords.[50] The Liberals sought a mandate to pass their Finance Bill and smash the veto, and Asquith repeatedly insisted that the national will, as embodied in the democratically elected House of Commons, must be allowed to prevail within the lifetime of a single Parliament. In his best Limehouse form, Lloyd George denounced the House of Lords as 'broken bottles stuck on a park wall to keep off radical poachers from lordly preserves.' Patrician Tories like Walter Long, Alfred Lyttelton, and Henry Chaplin were regularly shouted down at the hustings, and the Hon. F. W. Lambton was actually stoned in South East Durham. Quite by coincidence, this was also the first general election in which the peers themselves took part in large numbers. But most of them were out of touch with electioneering, and they did their order little credit. Curzon did not endear the peers to the people by claiming that the Commons was dominated by 'passing gusts of popular passion', while the Lords represented the 'permanent sentiment and temper of the British people.' And it was decidedly ill-advised for him to inform the electors of Oldham in his most superior proconsular manner, that 'all civilisation has been the work of aristocracies.'[51]

The result of the election was that the Liberals lost 100 seats to the Unionists, and only retained their parliamentary majority with the support of the Irish Nationalists and the Labour party.[52] The government's position had clearly been weakened, and although it was widely recognized that the electorate had declared in support of the budget, it had not spoken so emphatically about the House of Lords.



7. 'The Old Trojan.' *Punch*, 2 Aug. 1911.

After a lengthy period of doubt, indecision, and prevarication on the part of the government, the budget was reintroduced in April 1910, and rapidly reached the upper house, where it passed through all its stages in one day, as the peers rather sheepishly let through a measure they had so recently denounced so vehemently.[53] In the same month, Asquith carried three resolutions into the Commons, which were explicitly designed to limit the power of the peers. In future, the Lords could neither amend nor reject money bills, the certification of which was at the discretion of the Speaker. They could reject any other bill from the Commons in two successive sessions, but if it was presented a third time, then it must pass into law. And so as to make the Commons even more the embodiment of the people's will, the lifetime of a full Parliament was to be reduced from seven to five years.

These resolutions were duly embodied in the Parliament Bill, which passed its first reading in the Commons in April 1910, with the support of the Irish and Labour parties. But in the increasingly tense and intransigent atmosphere of what soon became one of the hottest summers on record, it seemed highly unlikely that the peers would be prepared to vote through a measure that would be the instrument of their own permanent emasculation. In the midst of this uncertainty, King Edward VII – who had watched these recent developments with growing anxiety and alarm – died on 6 May 1910.[54] In the hope of averting what threatened to be a major constitutional crisis in the very first year of his reign, his worried and untried successor, George V, called an inter-party conference. But by November, it was deadlocked, and the government was clear that there must now be another general election. Asquith accordingly asked for a second dissolution, but at the same time obtained from the King a secret (and very grudging) undertaking that if the government was returned with an adequate working majority, he would be prepared to create the requisite number of peers to ensure that the Parliament Bill could be passed.[55]

The second general election of the year took place in December 1910. The only significant issue was the House of Lords and the Parliament Bill, and it was generally reckoned that this time, the outcome would be decisive. Lloyd George coined one more memorable phrase, noting that aristocracy was like cheese: 'the older it is, the higher it becomes.' The contest as a whole was fought in an atmosphere of increasing exhaustion, and when the results were in, the position of the parties remained essentially unaltered. In February 1911, the Parliament Bill was reintroduced, and it passed the Commons a second time in May.[56] The Lords allowed it through both its first and its second readings, but wrecked it in committee, and sent it back to the Commons in July. The lower house decisively rejected the Lords amendments, and Asquith now revealed that the King had already agreed to a substantial creation of peers if this was necessary to force the measure through the Lords. Threatened with the swamping of their house by as many as five hundred Liberal peers, the Unionist leadership of Balfour, Lansdowne, and Curzon, which had so recently been so intransigently defiant, promptly capitulated and, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and decisiveness, urged their followers to abstain, so that the measure might be voted through by the existing Liberal peers.[57]

But it soon became clear that this would not be enough to ensure that the Parliament Bill would pass. For while eighty-odd Liberal lords would vote for the bill, and more than three hundred Unionists would abstain, that left one hundred and twenty Tory peers who

were determined to defy Lansdowne and Curzon, and who preferred to die in the last ditch by voting against a measure they believed would ruin their House. At Curzon's behest, Lord Newton thereupon set out to persuade forty Unionist peers to vote in favour of the government's bill.[58] But even at the final debate, on 10 August 1911, it was not at all clear what the outcome would be. Many so called 'Ditchers' were sceptical of the government's threat to create more peers, and refused to accept the verdict of the people against the upper house. But many more peers agreed with the Duke of Devonshire, who could not 'regard the opinions and feelings of a large number of my fellow-citizens' with 'complete indifference', and resolved to abstain. In the end, the measure passed the narrow but definite majority of 131 votes to 114. But most of those in favour were bishops and recently created peers, rather than authentic grandees, and seven dukes actually voted against. In the words of Roy Jenkins, 'for the first time in the advance to political democracy in this country, there was hardly a patrician who would aid the process.'[59]

As Lloyd George had predicted, the peers had indeed decreed a revolution, but it was the people who had carried it out. Lord Salisbury's proud claim that 'no political force exists in the country' that could overwhelm the Lords had been exposed as a hollow boast. Instead of enhancing the power and prestige of the peers, as Balfour had confidently and complacently predicted in 1906, their House had been 'smashed beyond all recognition', and they themselves were 'the victims of a revolution'. But if anything, they were even more the victims of their own political incompetence and selfish arrogance. As representatives of the hereditary governing class, Balfour, Curzon, and Lansdowne had not exactly distinguished themselves, as shortsighted defiance had been followed by indecisive submission. And in the final vote, the massive phalanx of Conservative and Unionist peers had divided three ways, which left them defeated, discredited, and disillusioned.[60] They might, in some cases, retain great individual wealth, political influence, or personal prestige. But the belief in their innate superiority, in their collective political wisdom, in their unique position as the responsible and hereditary custodians of the national interest, was gone for ever.

As with the passing of the Great Reform Act, the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the thwarting of Home Rule, the debates in the Lords on the Parliament Bill ranked as one of the great occasions in recent British political history. But whereas the peers survived 1832, prospered after 1846, and enjoyed unprecedented popularity in 1893, there was no such gain or recovery from 1911. As Lord Balfour of Burleigh had predicted, their position, their power, their prestige,

and their usefulness were greatly and irrevocably diminished. While the rest of the polity had became more democratic, the veto power of the Lords had seemed increasingly anomalous and indefensible, and all the artifice of Salisbury, Balfour, and Lansdowne, in claiming that it was responsibly and altruistically exercised on behalf of the people, had convinced no one. By the passing of the Parliament Act, the House of Lords was effectively emasculated, and the advent of Labour as the second party in the state only marginalized it still further in the inter-war years. But it was 1911 that had been the great turning point. At the behest of Lloyd George, the people's trumpet had sounded, and though the blast had been a little uncertain, the citadel of patrician pre-eminence had finally fallen. Symbolically, and substantively, the political power of traditional landed society had been broken for good.[61]

ii. The Assault on 'Landlordism'

The 'war of [the] classes', to which Salisbury so presciently drew attention in the spring of 1880, was not confined to the battles over the extension of the franchise and the ending of the Lords' powers of veto. It also concerned what Disraeli had described as the principles on which the holding and ownership of land would in future be based. During the 1840s, at the time of the Anti-Corn Law League, there had been widespread agitation, led by Cobden and Bright, against the excessive concentration of landed property in the hands of a few patrician owners, and against the law of primogeniture and the practice of strict settlement, which were held to be responsible.[62] But it was mainly confined to England, and the demand for 'Free Trade in Land' was far less popular than that for free trade in corn. But during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, 'the land question' assumed an altogether more central place in British politics. In England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, there were varied, widespread, and sustained demands for changes in the structure of landholding, and even for the extinction of 'landlordism' itself. And in an increasingly democratic polity, these were demands that no government, whatever its political hue, could ignore.[63]

One reason why 'the land question' became so much more prominent was that for the first time since Domesday, detailed information became publicly available about the inequitable distribution of property and the remarkable extent of patrician wealth.[64] In early 1871, Lord Derby moved for an official inquiry into the pattern of landownership throughout the British Isles, and during the next four years, the data was collected by local government officials on a parish-by-parish basis. It was then reworked into an alphabetical list

of owners for each county, and the results were duly published as the *Return of the Owners of Land*, in 1876. The figures were then reworked again by John Bateman, an Essex squire, who produced a book entitled *The Acreocracy of England*, which listed alphabetically all landowners with more than 3,000 acres, and gave details of their holdings, county by county, as well as of their rentals. The second edition, retitled *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland*, extended the coverage to the British Isles as a whole. And a final revision added all landowners with 2,000 acres and £2,000 a year. The result was the first comprehensive account of landholding in Britain in nearly a millenium.[65]

But what, exactly, did it show? Lord Derby's motive in moving for such an inquiry was that he believed its findings would refute the accusations made by radicals that landownership was concentrated in very few hands. In 1861, on the basis of the recent census data, John Bright had rashly claimed that the whole of England was owned by less than 30,000 people, and that 'fewer than one hundred and fifty men' held half of it. The *Return of the Owners of Land* gave Derby some comfort, because it showed that there were nearly one million owners in England and Wales alone. And it was certainly not the case that half of the country was owned by a mere one hundred and fifty people. But while Bright's detailed figures were discredited, his general argument was amply vindicated. For the statistics demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that the pattern of landownership throughout the British Isles was quite exceptionally concentrated. One-quarter of the land of England and Wales was owned by 710 individuals, and nearly three-quarters of the British Isles was in the hands of less than five thousand people. Even more remarkably, it emerged that twelve men between them possessed more than four million acres, and that 421 men owned nearly twenty-three million acres.[66]

In short, these figures revealed a pattern of landownership throughout the British Isles widely believed to be more concentrated and monopolistic than in almost any other European country. And they also revealed the Himalayan scale of the incomes that the patricians drew from their estates in the form of rent – incomes which, in the case of the super-rich, were well in excess of £100,000 a year, and which, in virtually every case, were *unearned*.[67] Inevitably, the publication of such data placed the notables of late-nineteenth-century Britain in an exceptionally exposed position. As a Belgian economist explained, 'the concentration of land in large estates among a small number of families' was 'a sort of provocation of levelling legislative measures.' And the more democratic the British polity became, the greater the provocation seemed. But in addition, it caused many

people to wonder precisely what the grandees and gentry were doing to justify their unearned incomes and their monopoly holdings, and it enabled a succession of radical politicians, from Joseph Chamberlain to Lloyd George, to pillory them unforgettably (and unanswerably) as an idle and parasitic class, 'who toil not, neither do they spin.'[68]

Moreover, in one very significant way, these figures were underestimates, for they gave no details about urban, as distinct from agricultural land. But this defect was partially made good by two further government inquiries, the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, and the Select Committee on Town Holdings, both of which met during the 1880s.[69] They did not provide systematic details of the rentals and acreage of the great aristocratic building estates, in London or the provincial towns. But they did furnish abundant information about the extent of patrician urban holdings, the likely revenue that was being drawn from them, the patterns and problems of management, and the complaints voiced by many tenants. And they also showed the massive gains that might be expected from the 'unearned increment' – when, at the end of a ninety-nine year lease, both the land and the buildings reverted to the ground landlord, who could then re-let at a vast profit. Here was yet further evidence of the power, the opulence, and the negligence of the landed class – enjoying enormous incomes that were the fruits of other people's labour, while often allowing the houses in which they lived to degenerate into squalid and appalling slums.[70]

These detailed revelations were a godsend to radicals anxious to agitate the land question throughout the British Isles in the more democratic climate of the 1880s. In assailing patrician privilege and territorial monopoly, they had the facts on their side. But in addition, the relations between landlords and tenants themselves markedly deterioriated because of the 'great depression' in agriculture, which began in the closing years of the 1870s. The economic consequences for the landowners of this sustained and debilitating slump will be discussed in the next chapter. But its political consequences were no less traumatic – for they severely strained the relatively harmonious connections that had existed between landlords and tenants in the relatively heady days of mid-Victorian prosperity.[71] The dramatic fall in prices meant that the farmers' profits also plummeted, and that the landowners' incomes suffered correspondingly. Inevitably, there were disagreements about who was bearing the greater burden, and about who, exactly, was responsible. Naturally enough, the hard-pressed tenant farmers blamed their landlords. And from there, it was but a short step to collective hostility, to

organized and orchestrated protest, and to more widespread criticism of the conduct and legitimacy of the whole landed order.

The leading sector in this new and determined assault on 'landlordism' was Ireland, where even in the mid-Victorian years, relations between landlords and tenants had often been strained – partly because of the bitter legacy of the Famine, partly because of the endless sub-division of peasant holdings, and partly because the owners were Anglophile Protestants while the tenants were Anglophobe Catholics. During the late 1870s, and throughout the 1880s, the agricultural economy was destabilized by a combination of bad harvests and bad weather, falling prices and falling output.[72] The result was misery and starvation unprecedented since the Famine, and an explosion of anti-landlord feeling, which began among the smallholders on the west coast in County Mayo, and gradually spread among the tenant farmers throughout the whole of the country. In every province, mass meetings were held, tenants refused to pay their rents, landlords and their agents were subjected to assault, intimidation, and social ostracism. And in the autumn of 1879, these localized protests were moulded and mobilized into a national protest movement, known as the Land League. Its President was Charles Stewart Parnell, its Secretary was Michael Davitt, and its self-proclaimed objective was to wage unremitting 'war against landlordism for a root settlement of the land question.'[73]

The resulting Land War lasted for three years, and although the landlords retaliated by evicting recalcitrant tenants in unprecedented numbers, they never fully recovered from this nationwide display of rejection and hostility. The Land Leaguers' aims were plain. In the short run, they wanted their rents drastically and dramatically reduced. More generally, they sought to strengthen their position by winning from the landlords what was known as 'Tenant Right': fair rents, fixity of tenure, and free sale, together called the 'three F's'. And in the long run, they looked forward to regaining the soil for themselves, and to the extinction of 'landlordism' altogether. By the end of 1882, the agrarian violence had diminished, but it flared up again four years later, in what was known as the 'Plan of Campaign', led by William O'Brien and John Dillon. This time, the rent strikes were more carefully organized, and estates were deliberately selected that were already on the brink of bankruptcy, like Lord Kenmare's in Killarney, and Charles Ponsonby's in County Cork. Indeed, it was only the support of a patrician syndicate, organized by Arthur Smith-Barry, himself a Tipperary owner, and financed by some of the richest grandees in Britain, that enabled some of these estates to survive at all.[74]

8. 'The Irish Land League: Mr Boyton burning the Duke of Leinster's leases'. *Illustrated London News*, 8 Jan. 1881.

In the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, there were similar outbursts of anti-landlord agitation among the crofting communities.[75] As in the west of Ireland, the land was poor, the climate inhospitable, the holdings too small. And there was the powerful folk-memory of the Highland Clearances, half a century before. The winter of 1881–2 was particularly severe, and many crofters were so destitute they were no longer able to pay their rents. The factors of the great estates tried to evict them, and the crofters retaliated by taking back grazing rights of which they had been deprived, or by not paying rent when they could still afford to do so. Inevitably, this escalated into violence, most famously at the 'Battle of the Braes' on Skye, in April 1882, when policemen from Glasgow clashed with crofters. For the rest of the decade, there were disturbances on Skye and Tiree, in Ross and Sutherland, and gunboats and marines were regularly sent in to quell the unrest. Harcourt believed this agitation marked 'the opening of a new land question, which will not be confined to the Western Highlands.' And in 1886, Balfour claimed that 'the condition of lawlessness which has been permitted to run an unchecked course for three or four years exceeds that in any part of Ireland'.[76]

The Crofters' War was the most severe crisis in the Highlands since the heyday of Jacobitism, it received the very widest attention in the Scottish and English press, and it was supported by a much larger population of urban and lowland Scots. Foremost among these was John Murdoch, proprietor of *The Highlander*, an Inverness newspaper, which was consistently hostile to the landowners. Equally influential was Professor John Stuart Blackie, a Classicist with a romantic passion for all things Celtic, who mobilized the recently-founded Gaelic societies of Scotland in support of the crofters, and who helped to found the Highland Land Law Reform Association in 1883.[77] The Association soon boasted branches in London, Edinburgh, Inverness, and most Highland towns, and was renamed the Highland Land League in 1887. Its aim was to force the crofters' campaign to the forefront of British politics, to support their demand for the 'three F's', and to 'restore to the Highland people their inherent rights in their native soil.' Both the Irish precedent, and the Irish connection, were plain. In 1882, and again in 1887, Michael Davitt toured the Highlands, and urged the crofters to 'organise and agitate until they had overthrown the whole fabric of the landlord system.'[78]

In Wales, the animosity felt towards the grandees and gentry by the farmers was equally intense. As in Ireland, the landlords and tenants were divided by religion, and although there had been nothing as severe as the Famine or the Clearances, there was the memory of large-scale evictions after the general elections of 1859

and 1868. The collapse in livestock prices during the mid-1880s greatly aggravated these rural tensions, and once again it was the 'land question' and the very legitimacy of 'landlordism' which was at the centre of the ensuing agitation.[79] In 1883 the Rev. Evan Pan Jones formed the Society of the Land for the People. In 1884 Michael Davitt met with Welsh land reformers, and two years later, he went on a speaking tour throughout the country. At the general election of 1885, every Liberal MP elected for Wales had included land reform in his manifesto, and in the following year, the Rev. Thomas Gee established the Welsh Land League, explicitly modelled on its Irish counterpart, with branches up and down the Principality, which aimed to press for the 'three F's'. Soon after, it merged with the Anti-Tithe League, to mount a concerted campaign against the alien landlords, with their alien church.[80]

With the exception of the anti-tithe riots of 1887–9, there was hardly any unlawful violence in Wales, and rent strikes on the Irish or Scottish pattern were quite exceptionally rare.[81] But in the press, and from the pulpit, there was a widespread and sustained attack on the landowners, who were universally vilified – for their high rents, for their evictions, for their absenteeism, for being the one great cause of all the ills in contemporary rural society. In *The Baner*, Thomas Gee denounced them as 'cruel, unreasonable, unfeeling and unpitying men', who were 'devourers of the marrow of their tenants' bones'. And T. J. Hughes claimed that the landlord 'dwarfs and blights everywhere our national growth.' By the 1890s, the sustained and savage onslaught of the Welsh nonconformist press engendered an 'all-pervading, ubiquitous anti-landlord sentiment'.[82] Once again, the landlords were forced on to the defensive: not so much because their rents were being withheld, but because they were losing the battle in the propaganda war. Even more ominously for the future, it was in this tense and bitter atmosphere, suffused with hatred of the 'alien aristocracy', that a young Welshman called Lloyd George grew up, and grew up hating landlords . . .

The social fabric of rural England was never subjected to the same degree of stress that characterized Ireland, Scotland, and Wales during the 1880s. But in a less violent manner, the traditional ties of deference and dependency were substantially undone. It was widely believed that the landlords themselves were primarily responsible for the depression in agriculture, because their rents were too high. There was a noticeable revival of the 'Free Trade in Land' campaign, and a string of books and pamphlets were published by middle-class reformers such as G. C. Brodrick, J. E. Thorold Rogers, and C. Wren Hoskyns.[83] In 1879, the Farmers' Alliance was established, a national organization of disenchanted tenants, which demanded the

abolition of the Game Laws and for the establishment of the 'three F's' in England. Two years later, the American socialist Henry George made the first of a series of sensationally successful visits to Britain, proclaiming that landownership was the cause of all inequality, and that a single tax on rent should supersede all others. In a different radical tradition, Alfred Russell Wallace urged that all land should be nationalized. And in his 'Unauthorised Programme' of 1885, Joseph Chamberlain made the landlords his prime target, demanded the return of the land to the people, and insisted that each rural labourer should be given 'three acres and a cow'.[84]

But it was not just in the English countryside that the landlords were increasingly beleaguered: it was in the towns and cities as well. The 'single tax' doctrines of Henry George were easily adapted to an urban setting, and by the end of the 1880s, there were widespread demands among more radical members of the Liberal Party for direct taxes on ground rents and the 'unearned increment'. In 1884, the Leasehold Enfranchisement Society was established, to campaign for greater security of tenure for urban lessees, and for the gradual breakup of the great urban estates. It produced a constant flow of books and pamphlets, gave some of the most damning evidence to the Select Committee on Town Holdings, and spawned a host of provincial branches.[85] For the attack on the great ground landlords was not confined to London. As the resources and confidence of local authorities grew, so did their hostility to nearby notables. In Bury, where Lord Derby was the pre-eminent owner, the Town Council passed a unanimous resolution against the leasehold system. In Sheffield, where the Duke of Norfolk and Earl Fitzwilliam held massive estates, the opposition was led by the Mayor. And in the 1880 general election in Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain defeated Augustus Calthorpe, brother of the owner of Edgbaston, after a singularly vituperative and vitriolic campaign.[86]

So, in the very same decade that the patricians were being attacked for their monopoly of political power in the Lords, they were also being attacked for their monopoly of territorial power on the land. The degree of violence varied, and so did the degree of support: but during the 1880s, the landlords of Britain – *as landlords* – were the object of unprecedented criticism, hostility, and abuse. There were widespread demands that the state should intervene on the side of the people: by regulating the hitherto sacrosanct relations between landlord and tenant, by imposing heavier taxation on rural and urban rentals, and even by abolishing 'landlordism' altogether, and returning the land to the people. On the Celtic fringe no less than in England, the agitations mounted were popular and well organized, and used all the sophisticated techniques of modern propaganda. There

were clear connections in policy and personnel between the different Celtic Land Leagues, and Henry George campaigned, not just in England, but also in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. And the result was that throughout the length and breadth of the British Isles, it was the landlord, rather than the capitalist, who was depicted as the scapegoat for the ills of contemporary society.[87]

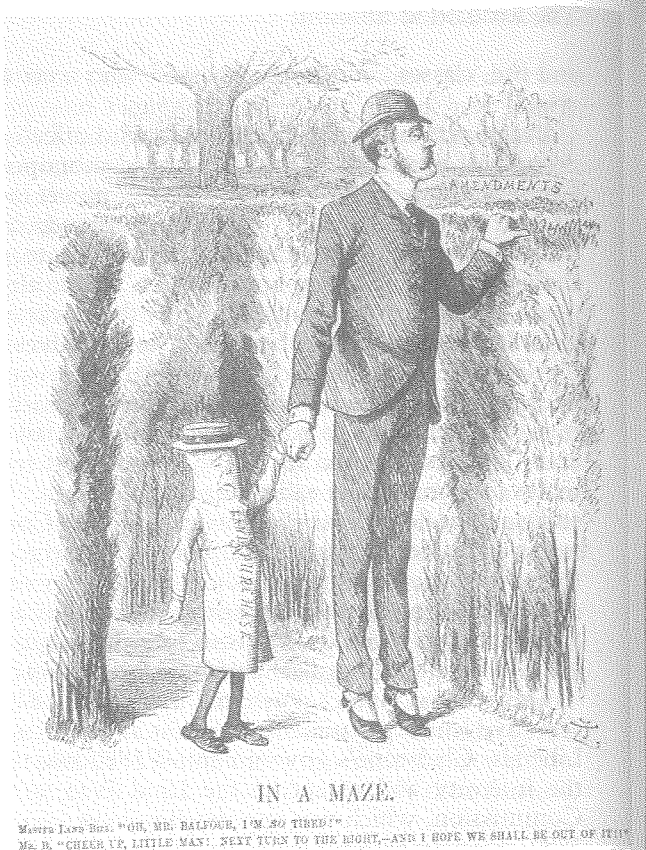
In retrospect, it seems clear that some of these arguments were mistaken or over-simplified. In Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, the charges made concerning unfair rents, punitive evictions, and a lack of interest in improvement were distinctly exaggerated. In all three countries, the real problems lay with the thin soil, the adverse climate, and the peasant mentality, about which owners themselves could do nothing. To a considerable extent, the landlords were as much victims of circumstances as their tenants. And in the same way, the power of the great ground landlords in London and the provincial towns was much less absolute than it was fashionable to suppose.[88] But this only makes it the more surprising that the representatives of the old order made no concerted attempt to produce a coherent and reasoned defence of their position and of their property. The Duke of Bedford published a book to show how zealous he was as an agricultural landlord, and the Duke of Argyll wrote prolifically in denunciation of Henry George, the Irish Land League, and the Scottish crofters. But this was a feeble response to a formidable foe. Perhaps the aristocracy realized that in the democratic climate of late-nineteenth-century Britain, it was impossible to justify their financial privileges and territorial monopoly.[89]

And if the landlords did not feel able to defend themselves and their estates, they certainly could not expect the governments of the time to come to their aid, however patrician in personnel they might still be. For as Britain moved inexorably in the direction of democracy, it invariably followed that political parties would be obliged to woo the mass electorate, and that administrations would be increasingly compelled to take the side of the tenant rather than the landlord, the crofter rather than the laird, the poor rather than the rich, the town rather than the country.[90] As Lord Dufferin explained to the Duke of Argyll in April 1881, a full four years before the passing of the Third Reform Act, 'The tendency of the extreme section of the Liberal Party is to buy the support of the masses by distributing among them the property of their own political opponents, and it is towards a social rather than a political revolution that we are tending.' And in 1885, the radical Henry Labouchere made precisely the same point, but with relish rather than regret: 'The tendency of legislation in future', he noted, 'must be to suppress landlords.' As Gladstone himself admitted, when it came to a battle between 'masses' and the 'classes', it was the 'masses' who were ultimately going to win.[91]

But it was not only the Liberals who effectively abandoned the defence of great estates and the landed monopoly: so, too, did the Conservatives. For they also felt the power and the pressure of democracy. As Salisbury himself admitted, 'all legislation' was 'rather unwelcome' to the élite, 'as tending to disturb the state of things with which they are satisfied.'[92] But after 1885, legislation could not be avoided, and after 1886, there was often Unionist pressure for more reform than the Conservatives themselves would ideally have countenanced. Even that most superior of men, the young George Curzon, was forced to admit in 1887 that 'the statesman who attempts to rule a democracy by laws framed on aristocratic lines is doomed to failure.' And another patrician colleague made the same point even more emphatically. 'Under our present suffrage', he noted in the following year, 'the Conservative Party can never again be an aristocratic party or a party of privilege . . . It is forced to appeal to the prejudices and desires of the poor.' Put the other way, it could no longer protect the assets and the estates of the rich. The best it could do was to pass pre-emptive legislation in the hope of fending off radical demands for even more drastic reform.[93]

This is most vividly illustrated in the case of Ireland, where Conservative land legislation was at least as radical as that passed by the Liberals. Gladstone's government of 1880 was deeply impressed by the intensity and extent of the Land War, and the Bessborough Commission, which was appointed to look into the land question in 1880, strongly recommended that the tenants' demands be met. The result was the Land Act of 1881, which duly granted the 'three F's', set up a judicial tribunal to adjust (i.e. reduce) their rents, and made a small sum of money available to encourage tenants to purchase their holdings from the landlord.[94] From the standpoint of the landowners, this was a measure at once momentous and ominous. It interfered with freedom of contract, effectively took away their power to fix rents, and greatly reduced their control over their estates. More generally, it was the product of an uncritical and wholehearted acceptance of the tenants' case against the landlord, and it assumed that only by regulating and restricting the owner could Irish discontent be alleviated. And the minor clauses for land purchase, which enabled tenants to borrow money to buy out the owners, portended the demise of landlordism itself. As the Duke of Argyll complained, it spelt 'death to ownership of land in Ireland.'[95]

But the Tory peers were so distressed and demoralized by the Land War that they eventually let the measure through. And thereafter, Lord Salisbury and Arthur Balfour soon decided that the only



9. 'In a Maze.' *Punch*, 23 May 1891.

hope for the Irish landlords was to extend the provisions of land purchase so that they could sell their estates to their tenants on the best possible terms. In 1885, the Ashborne Act made £5 million available for this purpose, and three years later, the sum was doubled. Meanwhile, the Cowper Commission had reported in 1887 on the working of the Land Acts of 1881 and 1885, and this resulted in a further round of judicial reductions in rents.[96] In 1891, a much more extensive Land Purchase Act was passed, which increased the amount of money available to £33 million, and there were further minor adjustments made in 1896. But it was not until 1903, with the passing of Wyndham's Land Act, named after the Irish Secretary of the time, that the land purchase scheme was widely adopted. It successfully encouraged the sale of entire estates, by making more money available to tenants on more advantageous terms, and by providing an extra bonus for the landlords. And in 1909, the Liberal

government passed another measure, known as Birrell's Land Act, which extended its provisions still further.[97]

In the aftermath of the Land War, it was widely believed, by Liberals and Conservatives alike, that land purchase was the only viable solution to the land question. As *The Times* observed in December 1885 'the leading Irish idea at the present time is to transfer the land from the landlords to the tenants.' Naturally, there were variations of opinion among leading politicians of the day, and Gladstone himself was never fully reconciled to the idea.[98] But advanced Liberals enthusiastically embraced the programme of the Land League, and uncritically accepted the arguments that the landlords were entirely to blame. As John Morley remarked, 'In my heart, I feel that the League has done downright good work in raising up the tenants against their truly detestable tyrants.' At the other extreme, Lord Hartington wearily recognized that in the circumstances of the time, there was no viable alternative. And he was comforted to know that the Conservatives fully shared his views. As he put it in April 1882, 'There is very little real difference between us and the opposition now on Irish land questions. They have accepted the Land Act . . . ; and there is very little difference in principle between us about the extension of the purchase clauses.'[99]

As so often, Hartington's analysis was exceptionally acute. Although the Conservative party was, *par excellence*, the party of the landed interest, Salisbury had concluded as early as 1882 that nothing could be done to save the Irish landlords in the long run, and that their only hope was to sell out on the best terms they could get, rather than run the risk of forcible appropriation at a later date at the hands of a more radical government.[100] To the extent that the object of the exercise was to ensure that the Irish landowners were adequately compensated for the loss of their estates, this was indeed a sympathetically motivated policy. But in fact, the Tory hierarchy thought no more of the Irish landlords themselves than did the Liberals or the Land League. 'How is it possible', W. H. Smith once asked, 'to keep the [Irish] landlords and – I sometimes think – is it worthwhile to try?' It was reported of Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1886, that he 'dislikes and despises the Irish landlords, and has no inclination to make much effort on their behalf.' And his successor, Arthur Balfour, was equally censorious. 'What fools the Irish landowners are', he complained to Salisbury on one occasion, 'some stupid, some criminal, many injudicious.'[101]

Predictably, the Irish landlords bitterly resented what they regarded as their 'betrayal' by a succession of British governments. Of Gladstone, nothing better could realistically have been expected: it was their 'abandonment' by the Conservatives that caused them so

much anger and pain. In 1887, Lord Westmeath complained that he had 'never expected to be ruined by the party that my family had spent hundreds of thousands of pounds to support.'[102] To Lord Clonbrock, it now seemed as though policy and legislation was entirely determined 'by resistance to the law and by votes in the ballot box.' In the Commons, Colonel Saunderson denounced the Land Bill of 1896 as a sign of the overweening influence of Chamberlain, and Arthur Smith-Barry described it as a surrender to the tenants. And on behalf of the Irish Landowners' Convention, an organization that vainly tried to protect the interests of the patricians and their property, the Duke of Abercorn claimed that 'the proper name of this Bill should be the "Save us from our friends Bill".' 'Who', asked Lord Muskerry at the time of Wyndham's Land Act, 'are the present custodians of Conservative principles? . . . Past governments who claim to be Conservative have been anything but Conservative as regards their Irish policy.'[103]

But it was not just that many landowners regarded this essentially bipartisan solution to the Irish land question as being intrinsically pusillanimous. It was also that they feared that what was being done to Irish landlords today would be done to British landlords tomorrow. When brooding on the terms of the Irish Land Bill in 1880, Gladstone was fully aware of the precedents which it would establish. It would, he recognized, 'introduce fundamental changes in the nature of property, which might . . . next be found difficult to confine to one country of this kingdom.'[104] And since disaffected tenants in Scotland, Wales, and England were soon to demand for themselves the 'three F's', judicially adjusted rents, and some measure of land purchase, the pressure to extend the terms of Irish land legislation to other parts of the United Kingdom was bound to become very great. As R. E. Prothero put it in 1887, 'the situation is indisputably grave; revolutionary legislation is powerfully advocated, and the position of the landlord is completely isolated.' Once the legitimacy of landed property was successfully challenged in one part of the kingdom, it was bound to be threatened elsewhere.[105]

In Scotland, the unrest in the crofting communities was very much observed through Hibernian spectacles, by Liberals and Conservatives alike. In February 1883, Gladstone appointed a Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of Lord Napier, which spent twelve months taking evidence from landowners, their factors, and the crofters themselves. Its report, published a year later, painted a vivid picture of poverty, insecurity and deprivation. For Gladstone, the solution was clear: 'the substantial application of the Irish Land Act to the Highland Parishes.'[106] And the Conservative leadership tacitly

agreed with him. In 1886, Gladstone's short-lived third administration duly passed the Crofters Act, which gave the Highlanders fair rent and security of tenure, and set up a Crofters Commission to adjust rentals and reduce arrears. By 1889, many crofters' rents had been compulsorily lowered by as much as 30 per cent, and in 1897 the Unionist government set up the Highland Congested Districts Board, so as to make more land available to them. In 1907 and 1908, the liberals unsuccessfully attempted to extend this crofting legislation to the whole of Scotland, and to give local authorities powers of compulsory purchase. But in 1911, they finally did so, with the passing of the Pentland Act.[107]

Of course, this was not revolutionary legislation by comparison with Irish Land Purchase. And no such scheme was ever seriously contemplated north of the border. But for the landowners, the changes wrought by the passing and the provisions of the Crofters Act were themselves momentous enough. The appointment of the Royal Commission, and the legislation of 1886, demonstrated beyond all doubt that the government's sympathies lay with the crofters rather than with the landlords. Indeed, it was Gladstone's opinion that the crofters had been forcibly deprived of lands to which they possessed an inalienable historical right.[108] And the Crofters Act itself severely limited the powers of the landowner over his property. The Duke of Sutherland regretted that it had 'greatly altered the legal relations between tenant and landlord'. *The Scotsman* described it as 'a great infringement of the rights of private property.' And Fraser of Kilmuir feared 'communism looming in the future.' In Eric Richards's more measured words, the Crofters Act was 'a decisive and unambiguous piece of class legislation on behalf of the common people', 'retribution . . . imposed by a democratic government on a landowning class which was judged to have misused its traditional authority.'[109]

In Wales, by contrast, the issue never went so far, although in the early 1890s, it briefly looked as though it might. In 1892, Tom Ellis, a Welsh MP who had long been an activist in the land campaign, introduced a Tenure of Land Bill, which would have given security of tenure, fair rents, and a land court, on the Irish model. This time, however, Gladstone was convinced it was 'not the Irish case all over again'. But he did appoint a Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of the Liberal landowner Lord Carrington, to look into the land and agriculture of Wales, and promised 'a thorough, searching, impartial and dispassionate' inquiry.[110] For three years, it collected evidence, and the farmers, led by Gee and Ellis, produced their familiar litany of complaints. But the landlords and their agents made a much better showing than they had in Ireland or Scotland,

and provided ample evidence to rebut these accusations. When the commission finally reported, in 1896, it split on party lines, with the Liberal majority recommending that rents should be fixed by a court, while the Conservative minority insisted this would be an intolerable interference in freedom of contract. Since by then there was a Tory government, nothing more was done, and by the general election of 1906, the issue seemed moribund: only seven Liberal MPs included land reform in their election manifestos.[111]

In England, the course of land reform followed a different path again. The Select Committee on Town Holdings delivered no clear verdict for or against leasehold enfranchisement, and annual bills sponsored by the radical MP Henry Broadhurst went down to defeat in the 1880s and early 1890s.[112] Gladstone's Ground Game Act of 1880 gave tenant farmers the right to kill hares and rabbits, which had previously been the sole prerogative of the landowner, and was generally regarded as a victory over the landlords by the Farmers' Alliance. As Sir William Harcourt explained, 'the squires ground their teeth over it dreadfully, . . . but they dare not bite at it for fear of their constituents', an analysis grudgingly endorsed by William Bromley-Davenport, a back-bench Tory gentleman.[113] Three years later, the Liberal government passed an Agricultural Holdings Act, which made it compulsory for the landlord to compensate tenants for any improvements at the end of their tenancy. Once again, the measure was denounced as interfering with freedom of contract: but once again, the Tory peers felt obliged to let it through. Although it would be going too far to say that as a result, 'the injunctions of the state superseded the paternalism of the squire', it was clear that the landowners' autonomy had been further eroded.[114]

But these were relatively minor measures. More important, in intention if not in realization, was the policy of creating a new class of yeoman owner-occupiers in the countryside, and to do so by acquiring land from the holders of great estates, either voluntarily or compulsorily. This was partly a response to the statistical inquiries of the 1870s, which showed that the traditional small freeholder had virtually disappeared. It was partly an attempt to promote – or to pre-empt – Chamberlain's 'Unauthorised Programme' of 'three acres and a cow'. And it was partly designed to establish a new breed of peasant proprietor, with Ireland being regularly cited as an appropriate precedent. In 1887, the Conservatives passed an Allotments Act, which they followed with a Small Holdings Act five years later.[115] But although they gave limited powers to local authorities, these were minor pieces of legislation, and their effect on the structure of rural landownership was minimal. In 1907, the Liberal government passed the more powerful Small Holdings Act, which

gave local authorities compulsory power to buy land. It was hailed as a 'peasants' charter', which would usher in 'a peaceful agricultural revolution'. But as with its predecessors, little was effectively accomplished.[116]

Much more threatening to the grandees and gentry was the prospect of increased direct taxation of land. By 1891, the Liberal party was publicly committed to levies on mining royalties, to taxation of land values and ground rents, and to the imposition of death duties. In 1894, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, brought in the last of these proposals, at the relatively gentle level of 8 per cent. But it was the first deliberate attempt to tax landed wealth, and even among his colleagues it caused the greatest consternation. Gladstone, who had just retired, was much put out, and so was Rosebery, who regarded the scheme as an unworthy attempt to 'woo the masses'.[117] But Harcourt stood his ground, and for all their dislike of this 'punitive taxation', the Lords let the proposal through, and no Conservative government thereafter ever promised to repeal it. When the Liberals returned to power again, it was widely expected (and widely feared) that land reform would be high on their list of priorities. At the general election of 1906, two-thirds of the Liberal candidates endorsed such a programme, and Campbell-Bannerman himself spoke of the need to 'make the land less of a treasure house for the rich and more of a treasure house for the nation.' But apart from Asquith's budget of 1907, which imposed a higher rate of taxation on unearned income, little was done.[118]

Then came Lloyd George, and the People's Budget.[119] All his life, Lloyd George had believed in attacking landlords, and in breaking their monopoly of the soil as the necessary prelude to overthrowing their social privileges and political power. Quite simply, and quite sincerely, he hated the grandees and the gentry, and everything they represented. He had served his political apprenticeship in the Welsh land agitation of the 1880s, and although the land question had subsequently simmered down, Lloyd George himself never forgot it. In the 1906 election campaign, he promised that the 'next great legislative ideal' was the emancipation of ordinary people from 'the oppression of the antiquated, sterilising and humiliating system of land tenure'. Inevitably, in 1909, when looking for additional sources of revenue, he turned to the landowners. But the prime purpose of the land taxes which caused such a furore in the Lords was not to raise revenue. For Lloyd George, their real importance was that they enabled him to add on to his budget a provision for the surveying and valuation of all the land in the country, which was clearly intended as the necessary and ominous prelude to more far-reaching land taxes in the future.[120]

Once the budget was passed and the Lords' wings were clipped, Lloyd George moved rapidly into the attack again. For his aim was nothing less than to 'break down the remnants of the feudal system', by launching an unprecedented attack on the rural and the urban landowner, which he intended to make the centrepiece of the Liberal programme in the general election which was anticipated in 1915.[121] In the summer of 1912, he set up a Land Inquiry Committee, which planned to produce two reports on rural and on urban land in England, and two further volumes on Scotland and Wales. The first report, on rural land in England, appeared in the autumn of 1913, and formed the basis of the 'Land Campaign' which Lloyd George immediately launched. Once again, he pilloried the patricians, this time as men who selfishly monopolized the land, while allowing the rural economy to decay. And he outlined an audaciously wide-ranging scheme for rural regeneration and reform, including heavier taxation for landowners, state supervision and adjustment of rentals, greatly improved tenants' rights, the much more generous provision of smallholdings and allotments, and substantially increased labourers' wages. All this was to be financed out of landlords' rents, rather than farmers' profits, and it was to be superintended by a newly established Ministry of Land.[122]

It is no exaggeration to say that this programme put the fear of God into the landowning classes – which was exactly what Lloyd George intended. It was prefaced by what Lord Malmesbury called 'violent, uncalled for and unjust attacks upon landlords', and its proposals seemed to realize all their worst fears: unprecedented state intervention, higher taxation, judicial rents, and even some form of land purchase. They drew on a long tradition of radical demands, and of public hostility to the landed classes and the landed monopoly, and they were predictably popular with both the farmers and the labourers. As one Conservative agent noted, they attracted 'unprecedented enthusiasm in the rural districts.'[123] And they were followed in the spring of 1914 by equally radical proposals concerning urban land, which included a commitment to move the burden of local taxation from the tenant to the landowner, and a possible measure of leasehold enfranchisement. But neither campaign came to fruition. The proposals were only vaguely worked out, they were effectively repudiated by a group of influential Liberal MPs, the 1914 budget was a parliamentary fiasco, and then came the war.[124]

So there was no triumphant climax to the land campaign in the way that there had been over the People's Budget and the Parliament Act. But while it was not another victory for Lloyd George, it was in reality another defeat for the landowners. By 1914, the system

10. Lloyd George by Max Beerbohm.

of great estates had effectively disappeared in Ireland, and it was widely recognized, even by the landowners themselves, that it was no longer acceptable, or justifiable, in Great Britain. By 1914, many landowners had already decided to sell off parts of their holdings, and the First World War only accelerated that process. In many ways, market forces brought about exactly the result that Lloyd George had wanted to achieve by using the power of the state. When Lord Northampton put some of his property on the market in 1919, he did so in part because he believed 'that landowning on a large scale is now generally felt to be a monopoly, and is consequently unpopular.' Although lagged by a generation, the radical attack had finally and forcefully hit home. The assault upon 'landlordism' had struck its target.[125]

iii. Armageddon and Afterwards

On the death of his sovereign in 1910, the young Billy Grenfell wrote to his mother, Lady Desborough, as follows: 'I am sad about King Edward, aren't you? It seems as if the glory has departed; and there will be lots of war, and mothers will have to worry considerably.' It was understandable that in the summer of 1910, the titled and genteel classes should be feeling uncertain and unsettled. Yet within four years, maternal anxiety would reach new levels of in-

tensity, and Lady Desborough herself would experience the bitter grief of twice-bereaved motherhood. In May 1915, her eldest son, Julian, died of wounds in France, and less than two months later, his younger brother Billy was also killed, only one mile from the spot where Julian had been fatally wounded.[126] According to Lady Curzon, the Desboroughs 'stood the loss of their two brilliant sons as only such characters as theirs would.' But inwardly, their lives were darkened for ever, by 'such utter desolation, such extinction of joy, glamour, and hope.' For them, as for many of their class, the words spoken by Sir Edward Grey, on 3 August 1914, had turned out to be cruelly and personally prophetic: 'The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.'[127]

Nevertheless, when war was formally declared, it was greeted with rapturous enthusiasm, and the greatest anxiety of most young patricians was that they might not get to the front in time to enjoy the fun. Lord Castlereagh was 'afraid of missing seeing anything before the war was over.' Lord Tennyson remembered 'dressing and packing . . . in feverish haste, so anxious was I not to run any chance of missing the war.' 'Our one great fear', Oswald Mosley agreed, 'was that the war would be over before we got there.'[128] From South Africa, where he was stationed with his regiment, Julian Grenfell wrote home disconsolately to his parents: 'It is hateful being away in a corner here at this time . . . It must be wonderful in England now . . . I suppose the excitement is beyond all words.' And so, indeed, it was – for the women no less than for the men. When Lord Tullibardine was told by the War Office that he must mobilize and command the Scottish Horse, his wife 'nearly burst with pride.' And twenty years later, Viscountess Barrington could still recall 'the pride and exaltation of fond parents and wives, their willing offering of their sons and husbands, to fight in so great a cause in the early days of the war.'[129]

At the same time, the older generation of grandees did all they could to encourage recruiting in their localities. Magnates like the Duke of Bedford, Lord Leconfield, and Lord Ancaster outdid each other in the generous terms they offered their tenants and employees. They kept jobs open for the men who had joined up, they allowed the families of volunteers to live rent free in their cottages, and they continued to pay a part of their wages to their dependants at home. As county notables, Lord-Lieutenants, and Colonels of the Yeomanry, their work extended far beyond the boundaries of their own estates. Lord Lincolnshire raised four battalions of Volunteers in Buckinghamshire.[130] Lord Rosebery made rousing speeches in Linlithgow and Midlothian, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Lord Derby toured the County Palatine in his capacity as chairman of the West

Lancashire Territorial Association. 'If', he told one meeting, 'I had twenty sons, I should be ashamed if every one of them did not go to the front when his time came.' And Lord Lonsdale devised and distributed an inimitable recruiting poster that was printed in his racing colours of yellow, white, and red, and was widely distributed and displayed throughout the Lake District. 'Are you', it asked the inhabitants of Cumberland and Westmorland, 'a man, or are you a mouse?' Only one answer was possible.[131]

During these early days of war, the *grandes dames* were as much enthused and excited as the grandees. The Duchess of Westminster established a Red Cross hospital at Le Touquet, Lady Dudley set up an Australian Hospital nearby, and the dowager Duchess of Sutherland organized her own ambulance unit to serve in Belgium. She was obliged to retreat in the face of the German advance, and returned to England where she wrote an account of her experiences entitled *Six Weeks at the War*. In London, Lady Lowther organized the production of food and clothing parcels for Belgian prisoners in Germany, Mrs Alfred Lyttelton supervised the reception of Belgian refugees and made arrangements for their accommodation and employment, the future Lady Curzon helped run a night canteen at Waterloo Station, and Jennie Churchill prompted butlers to join up by publicly expressing her preference for housemaids.[132] Among the younger generation, Lady Diana Manners became a VAD probationer at Guy's, Monica Grenfell trained at Whitechapel Hospital, and Helen Manners qualified as an anaesthetist. North of the border, Lady Tullibardine staged a series of concerts in support of her husband's recruiting efforts in Perthshire, and later organized the knitting of 15,000 pairs of 'hose tops' to keep the legs of kilted Highland soldiers warm.[133]

To some degree, this patrician response was part of the general enthusiasm for war at the time; but there were also specific reasons why so many rushed so fervently to the colours in the autumn of 1914.[134] For more than thirty years, they had been the object of radical (and sometimes not so radical) attack: for their unjustifiable monopoly of the land, for their unearned incomes and their unearned increments, for their reactionary attitudes to social reform, for their anachronistic possession of hereditary political power, and for their leisured lifestyle and parasitic idleness. And in the aftermath of the Parliament Act, there were many grandees and gentry who genuinely believed that the best years for their kind and class were emphatically over. But then came the war, which gave them the supreme opportunity to prove themselves and to justify their existence. By tradition, by training, and by temperament, the aristocracy was the warrior class. They rode horses, hunted foxes, fired shot-guns. They

knew how to lead, how to command, and how to look after the men in their charge. Here, then, was their chance – to demonstrate conclusively that they were not the redundant reactionaries of radical propaganda, but the patriotic class of knightly crusaders and chivalric heroes, who would defend the national honour and the national interest in the hour of its greatest trial.[135]

But it soon became clear that discharging this traditional obligation was going to prove to be unexpectedly costly. Before the year was out, the Ancaster, Cadogan, Durham, Hardinge, Leconfield, Tweeddale, and Wellington families were plunged into mourning. The eldest sons of Lord Aylesford, Lord Yarborough, and Lord O'Neill were killed, the Hon. Arthur O'Neill being the first MP to lose his life in the war. The heirs to three great Scottish houses were also among the earliest victims: the Master of Burleigh, the Master of Kinnaird, and the Master of Kinloss. The Duke of Atholl, the Duke of Abercorn, and Lord Lansdowne each lost a son. When Percy Wyndham was killed, having inherited Clouds from his father only the previous year, his batman remembered that he 'died a soldier's death', and was 'like a father to his men'.[136] And when the Hon. John Manners died, his mother declared – in words reminiscent of Lord Derby – that if she had six sons, she would willingly send and sacrifice them all. Such 'spartan and stoical bravery' on the part of patrician parents was as predictable as it was becoming commonplace. For by the end of 1914, the death toll included six peers, sixteen baronets, ninety-five sons of peers, and eighty-two sons of baronets.[137]

During the course of 1915, it gradually became clear that the war and the casualties were going to be on a far greater scale than anything that anyone had imagined. The earliest victims of the new year included George Wyndham, the third member of his family to die, William Gladstone of Hawarden, the grandson of the Prime Minister, and Lord Wendover, heir to Lord Lincolnshire. 'He is very brave', Lord Bertie wrote of Wendover's father, 'but how sore his heart must be.' In the summer, the two Grenfell brothers were killed, and their deaths occasioned another outpouring of chivalric sympathy: Julian embodied 'all the glory and romance of war', while Billy was 'one perfect gallant knight'.[138] The Gallipoli campaign added yet more fatalities, including Lord Longford, Lord Vernon, and Charles Lister, the heir and only son of Lord Ribblesdale. But the most poignant death was that of Ivo Charteris, younger son of Lord Wemyss, aged only nineteen, after a mere five weeks on the Western Front. His father's response was 'most piteous – heartbroken and just like a child – tears pouring down his cheeks and so *naively astonished*.' And his sister, Lady Cynthia Asquith, was no less

distressed. 'Really', she confided in her wartime diary, 'one hardly knows who is alive and who is dead.'[139]

For the Charteris family, as for many others, 1916 only added more bitterness to their cup of sorrow. During the early months of that year, both Viscount Quenington, heir to Lord St Aldwyn, and Lord Weymouth, eldest son of the Marquess of Bath, were killed. In April, Hugo Charteris, Lord Elcho, the elder brother of Ivo, was fatally wounded in Egypt at the Battle of Katia. *The Times* commemorated him as one who best 'embodied the heroic spirit of the younger generation.' But this was of little comfort to his widow. 'How can I face the long years? . . . What does one do?' she tearfully asked Lady Diana Manners. In November 1916, Auberon Herbert, Lord Lucas, who was serving in the Royal Flying Corps, took off on a routine flight, but never returned.[140] He, too, was mourned as a latter-day 'knight of the round table.' And when Lord Feversham was killed on the Western Front, his cousin Lord Londonderry opined that 'those who fall in the war are the truly happy ones.' Such pious and platitudinous hopes could be neither proved nor falsified: but it was certain that those left behind were more than ever overwhelmed with grief. 'Speaking metaphorically', Lord Rosebery wrote in one letter of consolation, 'the fountain of tears is nearly dry. One loss follows another till one is dazed.'[141]

During 1917, the cascade of coroneted casualties continued unabated. One of the earliest victims was the son and heir of Walter Long, the Conservative cabinet minister and archetypal country gentleman. Among heads of families, the Earl of Suffolk and the Earl of Shannon were both killed. Lord Basil Blackwood, son of the Marquess of Dufferin, died in July, having already lost a brother during the Boer War. Later that year, the victims included the Hon. Henry Vane, heir to Lord Barnard, and Edward Horner, who died leading an attack on a village near Cambrai. Like Julian Grenfell, Horner embodied the grace and gifts of his generation to a quite exceptional degree, and he was the heir to an estate in Somerset which had been in his family for four hundred years.[142] In the same month, November, Lord Rosebery lost his younger son, Neil Primrose, and his remaining hopes for the future effectively died with him. By this time, neither the older nor the younger generation could come to terms with the scale of aristocratic slaughter. Cynthia Asquith feared that 'soon there will be nobody left with whom one can even talk of the beloved figures of one's youth.' And Lord Bertie felt that 'the war has made death so common that the disappearance of friends becomes almost an everyday occurrence.'[143]

This was not the gentlemanly, chivalric conflict that had been so euphorically anticipated by the young and old patricians in the

autumn of 1914: on the contrary, it was total war and total hell. But it was also total war in another quite novel way. For as the casualties mounted, many of the greatest country houses were converted into makeshift hospitals to accommodate the wounded and the convalescent, from Burleigh to Belvoir, Woburn to Windlestone. At Longleat, the famous Bath bedroom became an operating theatre, and beds were put in the saloon. The Duchess of Rutland turned 21 Arlington Street, the family's London house, into a hospital, with ten patients in the golden drawing room, and twelve more in the ballroom. Even the greatest town palaces were given over to the care of the sick, including Londonderry House and Grosvenor House. And the chatelaines often took it upon themselves to superintend the nursing. On his return to London as a wounded officer, the Hon. Lionel Tennyson found himself in the tender and titled hands of Lady Carnarvon and Lady Ridley. Their hospital was, he recalled, 'the best in London . . . No attention was too much trouble, the nursing was wonderful, and the food given us exquisitely cooked and served.'[144]

Some aristocratic ladies resolved to make their contribution to the war effort in the battle zone, rather than in the country house. Lady Muriel Paget organized an Anglo-Russian hospital on the eastern front, and her namesake, Lady Lelia Paget, went off to nurse the sick in Serbia. Lady Angela Stewart-Forbes established a canteen on the Western Front, and on the morning that the Somme offensive began, fried eight hundred eggs in three hours. But she so enraged Sir Douglas Haig that in the following year, he ordered her deportation. Her sister, the dowager Duchess of Sutherland, fared rather better. After her unhappy experiences in the autumn of 1914, she returned to the Continent and set up a hospital in Calais, which eventually contained 160 beds and employed a staff of one hundred people.[145] Not everyone approved of these 'grand ladies who are running hospitals in France.' Lord Crawford thought the Duchess of Westminster and the Duchess of Sutherland were particularly troublesome. They overspent, and expected the Red Cross to help them out. They shamelessly exploited their contacts in high places, and importuned busy generals and over-worked politicians. And they were so eager to keep their hospitals filled that they carried off invalids 'willy-nilly', like latter-day 'body snatchers'.[146]

But it was not just as nursing entrepreneurs that titled women involved themselves in the war effort. The Marchioness of Londonderry established the Women's Legion, a quasi-military organization, designed to free men, engaged in home duties, for military service. She wrote letters to *The Times*, obtained the support of Walter Long and Henry Chaplin, disregarded the hostility of the civil

servants in the Board of Trade, and secured official recognition for the Legion in February 1916.[147] At one training centre in Rutland, women were taught to work on the land as agricultural labourers. Another 40,000 qualified as cooks, and were despatched to army camps. And a third group were taught to drive ambulances and motor cars. Less happy was the story of Lady Violet Douglas-Pennant, sixth daughter of Lord Penrhyn. In the spring of 1918, she was made Commandant of the WRAF, where she found inefficiency, obstruction, and immorality in what she regarded as unacceptable abundance. The authorities did not share her view, and she was hurriedly and humiliatingly dismissed, despite the efforts of such aristocratic friends as Lord Ampthill and Lord Henry Bentinck to secure an official inquiry on her behalf.[148]

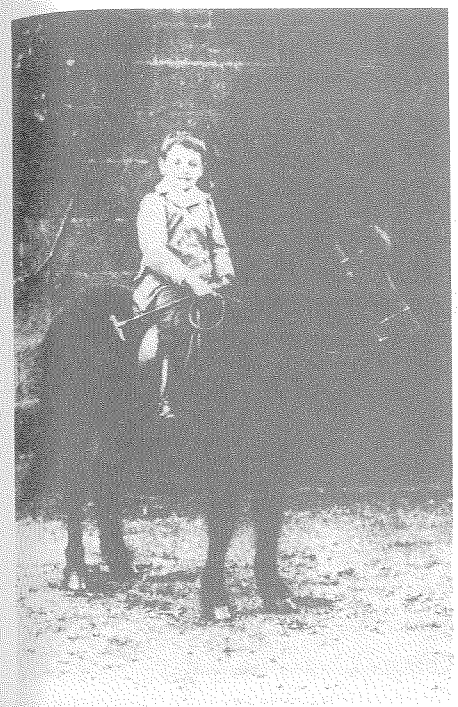
The younger generation of patrician women never got this close to the corridors of power. Lady Diana Manners had initially wanted to go to France as a nurse, but was discouraged by Lady Dudley on the grounds that 'wounded soldiers, so long starved of women, inflamed with wine and battle, ravish and leave half dead the nurses who wish only to tend them.' Having trained at Guy's as a VAD, she reluctantly became a nurse in her mother's hospital in Arlington Street. But for her, as for many of her generation, this harrowing work was by no means the most dreadful part of her wartime experience. Much harder to bear was the lengthening list of friends, lovers, and contemporaries who had been killed, and the unceasing anxiety as to who among the dwindling remainder would be next. In these 'nightmare years of tragic hysteria', she took refuge in drink and dancing, morphia and chloroform. By the end of 1917, 'her world was disintegrating': Billy Grenfell, George Vernon, Charles Lister, and Edward Horner were all dead. One of the reasons why she eventually married Duff Cooper – who was distinctly her social inferior, and had very little money of his own – was that he was the only one of her pre-war friends who came back from the killing fields.[149]

It was in this context – of disintegration such as the great Lord Salisbury could never have imagined – that on 29 November 1917, Lord Lansdowne published his famous letter in the *Daily Telegraph*, calling for an end to the war, and for a negotiated peace with Germany. Lansdowne was a patrician to his fingertips: 'the very model of the well-meaning representative of the aristocracy.'[150] He owned large estates in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Both by ancestry and by attainment, he belonged to one of the great governing families of the realm. In the course of an exceptionally long public life, he had been successively Governor-General of Canada, Viceroy of India, Secretary of State for War, and Foreign Secretary. He began his career as a Whig, split with Gladstone over Home Rule,

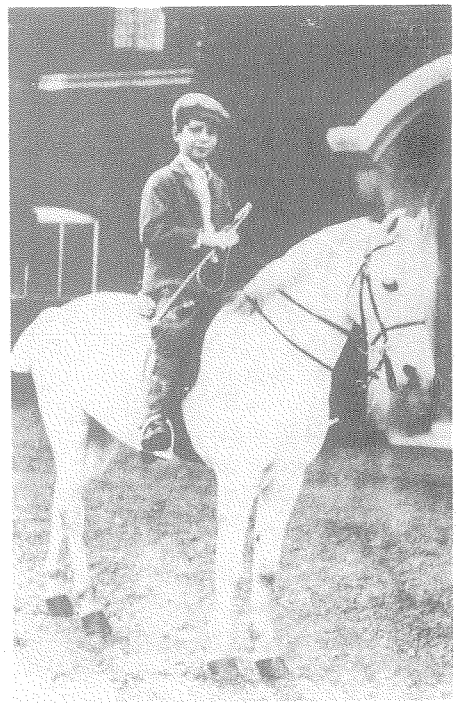
became leader of the Unionist peers, and from May 1915 to December 1916, was Minister without Portfolio in Asquith's coalition government. His patriotism and his integrity were beyond question. But his younger son had been killed in Flanders in 1914, and Lansdowne soon became convinced that Britain could not win, that Germany could not be broken, and that the senseless prolongation of 'the most dreadful war the world has known', would merely 'spell the ruin of the civilized world.'

Inevitably, Lansdowne's proposal was greeted with widespread amazement and hostility. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, and the entry of the United States into the war, it seemed peculiarly ill-timed. It caused surprise and distress among members of his family, many of whom were on active service. Like many disapproving politicians, Lord Crawford thought it the action of a 'nerve-wrecked wobbler' who felt 'vexation and annoyance' at 'being out of office'.[151] At best, Lansdowne's letter seemed a regrettable aberration at the end of a long and distinguished career; at worst, it was yet one more sign that the Whigs were incorrigible appeasers. But there was also something to be said in Lansdowne's defence. His action was neither hasty nor ill-considered. Far from being the product of a sudden loss of nerve, his letter merely elaborated in public the contents of his cabinet memorandum of November 1916. True to his Whig upbringing, he was making a 'dignified but fruitless appeal for moderation.' He was convinced that unless the war was rapidly terminated, 'the traditional social order' would be destroyed. Like his friend Sir Edward Grey, he knew that the lamps were rapidly going out: his peace proposal was a vain attempt to prevent them being extinguished altogether.[152]

But Lansdowne's letter was soon overtaken by events. Neither the final German onslaught, nor the Allied counter-attack, were propitious moments for peace negotiations. Meanwhile, the aristocratic fatalities continued throughout most of 1918. There were more heads of families, like Lord Rosse and Lord Poulett. There were more elder sons, like the Master of Belhaven, and Viscount Ipswich, heir to the Duke of Grafton. And there were younger sons like Eric Cawdor and Richard Clanmorris. Not surprisingly, when victory finally came, there were few among the patrician survivors who felt any sense of exultation. At the front, Oliver Lyttelton 'had expected riotous excitement, but the reaction of everyone, officers and men, seemed the same – flat depression.' In London, Oswald Mosley 'stood aside from the delirious throng, silent and alone, ravaged by memory.'[153] Alan Brooke felt exactly the same: 'That wild evening jarred on my feelings . . . I was filled with gloom . . . and retired to bed early.' Mary Wemyss agreed: 'No one', she observed, 'can feel light of heart . . . We miss our shining victors in the hour of victory.' For as Winston Churchill later recalled, 'the ache for those who will never come home' made the thought of joyous, carefree celebration seem almost blasphemous.[154]



11. The young Percy Wyndham.



12. John Manners on horseback.

Only in the aftermath of victory did the full magnitude of these patrician losses become apparent.[155] Three Wyndhams, two Grenfells, and two Charterises had fallen. Lord Penrhyn lost his eldest son and two half-brothers. The fifth Lord de Freyne and one of his half-brothers were killed on the same day in May 1915, and another half-brother died two years later. Lord Kimberley, Lord Middleton, and Lord Denbigh each lost two sons, and so did Sir George Dashwood. The dowager Countess of Airlie had lost her husband in the Boer War, and now lost a son, Patrick, and a son-in-law, Clement Mitford. One of Anthony Eden's brothers was killed in France in October 1914, and another went down at Jutland in May 1916.[156] Of the great Lord Salisbury's ten grandsons, five were killed in action. But even these examples cannot convey the full sense of bereavement that

13. The Egerton Monument in Chester Cathedral.

most landed families experienced, the inevitable result of their extended cousinhoods and interlocking marriage alliances, which meant that anxiety, loss, and grief were experienced many times over. On the west wall of the south transept in Chester Cathedral is a memorial commemorating *thirteen* members of the Grey-Egerton family of Oulton Park, who had died on active service during the war.[157]

Inevitably, these losses meant that the pool of aristocratic talent was visibly reduced during the inter-war years. It is not necessary to join the clichéd cult of the Wyndhams, the Grenfells, and the Charterises, to recognize that they were uncommonly gifted and promising young men, whose greatness had been predicted before they died, and was not just invented afterwards. In the same way, Lord Basil Blackwood seemed set for a distinguished career in colonial administration. Charles Lister was widely recognized as a diplomat of outstanding promise. And Edward Horner had begun to make his reputation at the bar. The deaths of Lord Alexander Thynne, Lord Quenington, Lord Ninian Critchton-Stuart, and the Hon. Arthur

O'Neill seriously depleted the dwindling ranks of patrician MPs. Lord Feversham was mourned as a landowner, politician, and soldier of peculiar versatility and promise. 'Not one of his contemporaries', Sir Almeric Fitzroy recorded, 'among the class which he represented had played so well in every sphere of activity the parts he assumed.' And Neil Primrose and William Gladstone were more than just the bearers of famous names out of the past: they were recognized by friend and foe alike as men with golden futures ahead of them.[158]

In the shadow of these grievous losses of irreplaceable talent and unrealized potential, it was widely believed that an entire generation of notables had perished during the First World War. Throughout the country, there were requiems for squires' sons whose swords were laid upon altar steps. Mourning hatchments were hung over the front door of many a mansion. And flags flew at half-mast from towers and turrets. Lord Henry Bentinck believed that 'everything generous, self-sacrificing and noble' had 'shed blood on the fields of Flanders.'[159] 'Truly', Lady Curzon later recalled, 'England lost the flower of her young men in those terrible days . . . There was scarcely one of our friends who did not lose a son, a husband, or a brother.' In an editorial of May 1920, *The Times* waxed unusually eloquent on the same theme, picturing aged patrician parents, with their sons 'lying in far away graves', and their 'daughters secretly mourning someone dearer than a brother.' But it was Alan Lascelles who summed up this feeling most pithily and poignantly on Armistice Day itself: 'Even when you win a war', he noted, 'you cannot forget that you have lost your generation.'[160]

Ironically enough, this argument received its most effusive and elegiac articulation at the hands of C. F. G. Masterman, who in pre-war days had been a member of Asquith's cabinet, and an enthusiastic supporter of Lloyd George, land reform, and the Parliament Act. But he was so impressed, and so saddened, by the supreme sacrifices made by the titled and territorial classes, that he devoted an entire chapter of his book, *England After the War*, to describing and lamenting what he called 'The Passing of Feudalism.'[161] The purpose of aristocracy, he contended, was war. And between 1914 and 1918, the British aristocracy had discharged its hereditary task with 'shining splendour – courage, devotion, care for the men under its charge.' But in the process, it had paid a mortally high price:

> In the retreat from Mons, and the first battle of Ypres, perished the flower of the British aristocracy . . . In the useless slaughter of the Grenadiers on the Somme, or of the Rifle Brigade in Hooge Wood, half the great families of England, heirs of large estates and

> wealth, perished . . . in courage and high effort, and an epic of heroic sacrifice, which will be remembered so long as England endures.

During the First World War, Masterman regretfully concluded, 'the Feudal System vanished in blood and fire, and the landed classes were consumed.'[162]

But this haunting image of doomed genteel youth, of an aristocratic holocaust, needs to be set in proper perspective. Many of those who were posthumously recruited into the so-called 'lost generation' were in fact drawn from the middle classes: Raymond Asquith, John Kipling, Vere Harmsworth, Patrick Shaw-Stewart, Rupert Brooke, to name but the most famous examples. And while the Wyndhams, the Grenfells, and the Charterises wrote exceptional letters, in which they expressed their sorrows with searing articulateness, there is no reason to suppose that the members of the more humble and less epistolatory classes were any less grieved. As G. W. E. Russell rightly remarked, 'The burden of the war lies as heavily on the poor as on the rich, for neither poverty nor riches can mend a broken heart.'[163] Nor should it be forgotten that there were many patricians who were true to their martial traditions, and who actually *enjoyed* the war. It was not only Julian Grenfell who 'loved fighting', and found it 'the best fun one ever dreamed of.' Oliver Lyttelton thought 'winning in war is at all times a beautiful and exhilarating experience.' And Harold Alexander regarded the whole thing as a 'terrific adventure', and much regretted the Armistice, when 'all good things' came to an end.[164]

Above all, it must be stressed that the overwhelming majority of those notables who served *actually returned home.*[165] Four-fifths of all British and Irish peers and their sons who joined up came back. For every family that suffered multiple losses, there were many more that survived intact. Seven close relatives of the Earl of Derby served in the war: all came back. Six kinsmen of Lord Saye and Sele were equally lucky. Five members of the Buccleuch, Courtown, Lucan, and Ampthill families also survived the war. The Dukes of Somerset, Marlborough, Atholl, Roxburghe, Manchester, Northumberland, Leinster, Sutherland, Abercorn, and Westminster joined the colours: all returned. And even when heads of families or elder sons were killed, this had 'extraordinarily little effect' on the continuity of landed life. The titles and estates of Lords Barnard, Powis, Yarborough, and Bath passed to a surviving younger son. And although Lord Lincolnshire's marquessate died with him, the older Barony of Carrington, and the family estates, passed to his younger brother. Only in a very few exceptional cases – like Ribblesdale and Llangattock – did a title become extinct because of death in war.[166]

Thus described, the genteel warriors of the 1914–1918 War were essentially the lost and found generation. And the survivors duly made their mark in the years that followed. Among prominent interwar politicians, Edward Wood, Oswald Mosley, and Winston Churchill had seen service in the trenches. By the late 1930s, the wartime generation was well represented in the National Governments. Lord Stanhope had served in the Grenadiers, and Lord Winterton was at Gallipoli. Lord Swinton and Lord Londonderry survived the Somme.[167] Lord Stanley and his younger brother Oliver both won the Military Cross. And Anthony Eden had ended the war as the youngest brigade major in the army. In the same way, the three great patrician commanders in the Second World War had all won their spurs in the First: Montgomery, Alexander, and Alanbrooke. And every aristocratic member of Churchill's peacetime administration of 1951–5 had fought in the trenches. In addition to the Prime Minister himself, Anthony Eden, Alexander, and Swinton, Lord Salisbury had served in the Grenadiers, the Hon. James Stuart had won the Military Cross (and bar), and Oliver Lyttelton had survived almost the entire war on the Western Front unscathed.[168]

But although the myth of the 'lost generation' does not survive detailed scrutiny in its most familiar form, the fact remains that the British aristocracy was irrevocably weakened by the impact of the First World War. Not since the Wars of the Roses had so many patricians died so suddenly and so violently. And their losses were, proportionately, far greater than those of any other social group.[169] A majority of those who served may in fact have returned: but it was a much smaller majority than for the middle or the working classes. Of the British and Irish peers and their sons who served during the war, one in five was killed. But the comparable figure for all members of the fighting services was one in eight. And the explanation is clear. The patricians were either professional soldiers or among the first men to volunteer. Most of them were junior officers below the rank of Lt. Colonel, who were rapidly posted to the front, where they shared the risks and dangers of trench life, and led their men over the top and into battle. During the first year of the war, one in seven of such officers were killed, compared with only one in seventeen of the rank and file. And at the Somme, Bernard Montgomery noted that 'we have been unlucky in losing rather a lot of officers in proportion to the men.' In terms of the *relative* numbers of lives lost, there is no doubt that the titled and territorial classes made the greatest sacrifices.[170]

At the same time, the war made them seem less distant, less Olympian, less remote. In the trenches, the owners of great estates and the bearers of illustrious names lived side by side with their men in novel circumstances of easy camaraderie and extraordinary squa-

lor. Many patricians owed their lives to ordinary soldiers who rescued them and carried them to safety, and came to feel closer to them than to their relatives back home. Across the length and breadth of Britain, country houses, which had previously been bastions of aristocratic exclusiveness, were thrown open to the sick and the convalescent of all social classes. And at home and overseas, titled nurses abased themselves to perform menial tasks for their social inferiors which they would never have dreamed of doing for themselves in ordinary life. They emptied chamber pots, changed soiled sheets, bandaged wounds, attended operations. They witnessed terrible pain, pointless agony, nightmarish death. They exchanged their cosseted, leisured, privileged existence for iron discipline, regular criticism, long hours, hard work, 'dirt, suffering, smells and squalor.'[171] After such sudden and unprecedented social mixing, the distancing aura that was an essential aspect of aristocratic hegemony would never be inviolate again.

But it was not just that the war made the notables seem less remote: it also made them seem much more vulnerable. Part of the mystique of aristocracy was (and is) an unshakeable self-confidence that all will turn out well, and an almost serene indifference to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. In August 1914, the patricians had eagerly anticipated a gentlemen's war, which would be over by Christmas. Despite the decline of the Irish landed ascendancy, despite the insults hurled at them by Lloyd George, despite the Parliament Act and the subsequent 'Land Campaign', they had rallied to the defence of their country and empire. But although they had fought like knights of old, they had been slaughtered like animals, and had fallen like flies. Among both the younger and the older generation, many shared Lord Wemyss's 'naive astonishment' that such a thing *could possibly happen to them*. Their collective self-confidence and their serene faith in their ultimate invulnerability were irretrievably damaged. It was no longer possible to regard the country house and landed estate as 'a little self-contained kingdom, . . . immune from unheralded invasion from outside.'[172]

Nor did such loss of life and confidence bring with it any gainful compensation. In November 1916, Lord Murray of Elibank predicted that in the future, 'the position of the Lords in this country will be much stronger, generally on account of the gallantry and losses on the battlefield of the peerage families.'[173] But this did not happen. The Parliament Act had made the second chamber effectively redundant, and most people were too preoccupied with their own grief to have any sympathy (or admiration) to spare for the titled and territorial classes. In so far as any group benefited from the war, it was the profiteers and the businessmen, the cronies and followers of

Lloyd George. As Lord Willoughby de Broke remarked in 1915, with understandable bitterness: 'His own friends are not being killed, while yours and mine are being picked off every day.'[174] Beyond that, it was the common man (and woman) who were the chief beneficiaries. In Eastern Europe, thrones and aristocracies tottered. And in Britain, the Fourth Reform Act gave the vote to all adult men, and to women over thirty. By an ironic turn of fate, the war in which the grandees and gentry had given so much was dedicated to 'making the world safe for democracy'.

Inevitably most surviving patricians, both young and old, contemplated the future with gloom and despondency that sometimes bordered on alarm. 'It is not so much the war', Arthur Balfour remarked, 'as the peace that I have always dreaded.' Old men like Rosebery, Lansdowne, and Balfour of Burleigh never really recovered from the deaths of their sons.[175] Bereaved mothers like Lady Desborough and Lady Horner (and Evelyn Waugh's Lady Marchmain in *Brideshead Revisited*) devoted themselves to compiling memorial volumes of letters and photographs.[176] Some surviving aristocrats felt a genuine sense of guilt that they had not shared the ultimate fate of their comrades and companions. Others, more certain than ever that the best years for their kind and class were gone, abandoned themselves to irresponsible self-indulgence. And most of them struggled, like Lady Cynthia Asquith, to come to terms with the fact that 'the dead are not only dead for the duration of the war.' In many ways, the lot of those who had passed on seemed infinitely preferable to the lot of those who were compelled to stay behind. The patrician paragons who had died never knew the disillusionment of the inter-war years. There were many who agreed with Norman Leslie: 'it is better far to go out with honour than to survive with shame.'[177]

The full extent of genteel bitterness, disenchantment, and infirmity of purpose during the inter-war years can only be guessed at. Even in private correspondence, complaining was not their style, and when the war memoirs began to flow during the late 1920s and early 1930s, they kept stern and significant silence. But there can be no doubting their bewildered resentment that a conflict which had seemed to be their opportunity had turned out instead to be a conflagration which nearly brought about their destruction. As Mary Elcho remarked, it was not just that the war destroyed millions of lives. It changed the world, *their* world, for ever, 'shaking all things to their foundations, wasting the treasures of the past, and casting its sinister influence far into the future.'[178] In this, as in so much else, the opinions of the Sitwells were far more typical of their class and their generation than they would ever have believed or admitted. For

them, as for most patricians, the Great War was truly the 'Great Catastrophe': and it lay 'across the years like a wound that never heals.'[179]

iv. Conclusion: The World Turned Upside-down

'Aristocracy', Robert Lacey once remarked, 'does not stand up well to misfortune. It is a fair-weather way of life.'[180] And as such, it was not at all well suited to the storms and tempests that raged and blew between 1880 and 1918. By definition, democracy and aristocracy do not cohabit easily, and they certainly did not do so in Britain between the passing of the Third and the Fourth Reform Acts. For these were the years in which the gentry and grandees lost the historical initiative, and lost the control of events. Instead of being the 'paragons of legislation' that W. S. Gilbert affectionately mocked in 'Iolanthe', they now appeared as the selfish and redundant vested interest that Lloyd George excoriated so unforgettably (and so unanswerably) at Limehouse. And instead of being the proud and revered holders of great estates which they administered with paternal benevolence, they were increasingly regarded as territorial monopolists who needed to be regulated and restrained. Undeniably, the nobles and notables had changed. They had become more anxious, and as a result, more selfish. But the world outside had changed even more. In the end, numbers triumphed over nobility, the vote vanquished the veto, the Land League conquered the landowner.

Three individuals stand out as the men who embodied and promoted these powerful anti-aristocratic impulses. The first was Michael Davitt, creator of the Irish Land League. For this was not merely the vehicle by which the cause of agrarian populism was so successfully advanced in his own country: in its programme and in its organization, it was the inspiration for similar anti-landlord movements in Scotland and Wales. The second was Joseph Chamberlain, whose big-spending brand of municipal socialism threatened the landowners in the towns, whose 'Unauthorised Programme' destabilized and enflamed the countryside, and whose vituperative vocabulary anticipated the rhetoric of the third of these aristocratic daemons: Lloyd George himself. With Lloyd George, the democratic attack on the traditional titled and territorial classes reached its climax. Quite simply, he refused to accept them at their own comfortable and superior self-evaluation, and he persuaded a large number of his fellow countrymen to agree with him. Instead of touching his forelock, he blew them raspberries. He taunted them, threatened them, taxed them, tormented them. He took away their hereditary power,

and seemed set fair to take away their hereditary acres as well. No wonder, by 1914, they hated him as much as he hated them.

From their own particular standpoint, at once so privileged and yet so vulnerable, the patricians saw themselves as the persecuted victims of a predatory democracy. Then in 1914, their luck changed – but for the worse. For they now became instead the sacrificial victims of patriotic endeavour. In January 1918, Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, whose time as British Ambassador to the United States was just drawing to a close, and whose elder brother had been killed in France two years before, composed a poem which developed this theme:

> I vow to thee, my country – all earthly things above –
> Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love.
> The love that asks no questions: the love that stands the test,
> That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best:
> The love that never falters, the love that pays the price
> The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.[181]

But for Spring-Rice, as for most patricians, the First World War meant more than martial martyrdom and poetic patriotism. For it was not just that they made these supreme sacrifices selflessly, stoically, and uncomplainingly. The greater and far crueller irony was that they had been made in the defence of a country that was gradually but irrevocably ceasing to be theirs.

3

THE DECLINE AND DISPERSAL OF TERRITORIAL WEALTH

> Whatever the professed reasons – agricultural depression, death duties, the campaign against landlordism – the estate system as it existed prior to 1914 did not survive the First World War.
>
> (J. V. Beckett, *The Aristocracy in England, 1660–1914* (1986), p. 475.)

> The break-up of Welsh estates was even more thorough than in England.
>
> (D. W. Howell, *Land and People in Nineteenth-Century Wales* (1977), p. 25.)

> In the two years after the armistice, four million acres of Scottish land – a fifth of the total – came on to the market as owners found the combination of increased taxes and higher costs squeezing income.
>
> (I. G. C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland, 1832–1924: Parties, Elections and Issues* (1986), p. 320.)

> By the early 1920s, . . . nearly two thirds of Ireland's total area had ceased to be the property of landlords.
>
> (S. Clark, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War* (Princeton, 1979), p. 349.)

The measures that were threatened and enacted by successive Liberal governments between 1880 and 1914 filled the British territorial classes with alarm. And the growing evidence, during the same period, and on into the inter-war years, that the Conservative party was no longer either willing or able to defend the land, only accentuated their well-justified apprehension. Instead of being politically valuable, the land of the British Isles was becoming politically vulnerable. To make matters worse, it was becoming economically vulnerable at the very same time – partly because a new and rival wealth élite was coming into being, partly because agriculture ceased to be as prosperous as it had been, and partly because one expression of the new political hostility to the land was that it was subject to quite unprecedented taxation. The combined result of these political and economic changes was that, between the 1880s and the 1930s, the financial condition and territorial circumstances of the British landowning classes were fundamentally and irrevocably transformed.

To begin with, they ceased to be the wealth élite as the rise of the great international and plutocratic fortunes, from the 1880s, signified new forms and new amounts of wealth, which were easily and

rapidly accumulated, which carried fewer attendant burdens and obligations, and which gradually eclipsed the resources of all but a very few very rich landowners. But simultaneously, the economic position of landowners was further undermined from within, as this period saw an almost uninterrupted depression in British agriculture, which led to a marked and sustained decline in prices, rentals, values, and confidence. In addition, a succession of Liberal, Conservative, Labour, and National governments increased their financial demands on landowners, by taxing both their capital and their income more severely than ever before. During the very period when land was losing both its political importance and its social prestige, it was increasingly becoming an uncertain and uneconomic asset.

Accordingly, from the 1880s, the attitudes that had customarily underpinned patrician landownership were brutally undermined, and the policies that landowners had pursued concerning their estates and their families were irrevocably put into reverse. Hitherto, most landowners had regarded their broad acres as a trust, an inheritance, which must be preserved and, if possible, enhanced, before being passed on intact and augmented to the next generation. They sought to improve and enlarge their holdings, to rebuild their mansions and their London houses, to fill and adorn them with works of art, and to exploit by their own efforts whatever non-agricultural resources they possessed. But from the 1880s, all this changed. Few great houses were built, either in London or the country, and many were sold or demolished. Works of art were dispersed rather than collected. There was a definite withdrawal from direct involvement in non-agricultural enterprises. Above all, there was a massive dispersal of land, throughout the British Isles, as estates tumbled into the market in the years immediately before and after the First World War.

The scale of this territorial transfer was rivalled only by two other landed revolutions in Britain this millenium: the Norman Conquest and the Dissolution of the Monasteries.[1] Put another way, this meant that the British landed establishment was in the process of dissolving itself, as it lost its unifying sense of territorial identity, and relaxed its dominant grip on the land. Of course, this was not a uniform process: poor patricians succumbed more easily than rich; the indebted were more vulnerable than those with unencumbered estates. In Ireland and Wales, the landowners virtually disappeared; but in England and Scotland, they survived more tenaciously. Yet whatever the qualifications, the fact remains that the dominant trend was no longer accumulation but dissolution. It was not just, as in former times, that a few families were selling out for strictly personal reasons, to be replaced by other landed dynasties. Between the onset

of the Great Depression and the outbreak of the Second World War, the British patricians, as the landowning class and as the wealth élite, were in decline, disarray, and dissolution.

i. Landed Riches Eroded and Overwhelmed

During the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, the British landed establishment had been the wealth élite of the richest nation in the world. But during the seventy years that followed, it was noticeably disturbed and diminished by new and international developments that it could not control, and in some cases could not survive. As the world became smaller, more competitive, and more unified; as distances were shortened by the steamship, the wireless, the telegraph, and the aeroplane; and as the economic autonomy and self-sufficiency of nations was eroded and undermined, the landowners of Britain were exposed to the full and icy blast of the global economy. Their economic circumstances were much less determined by the state of the harvest in Barset or by the health of their bank account in London, than by the price of wheat in Chicago and by financial dealings on the New York stock exchange. As Charles George Milnes Gaskell put it in an acute, prophetic, and pessimistic article, 'the vast increase in the carrying power of ships, the facilities of intercourse with foreign countries, [and] the further cheapening of cereals and meat', meant that, economically as politically, the patricians were no longer lords of the earth.[2]

One ominous sign of this was the explosive growth of a new international plutocracy, especially in the United States. As W. H. Lecky explained, 'there has probably never been a period in the history of the world when the conditions of industry, assisted by great gold discoveries in several parts of the world, were so favourable to the formation of fortunes as at present, and when the race of millionaires was so large.'[3] From the late 1870s to the First World War, there was a sudden expansion of quite unprecedented American fortunes – billionaires like Henry Ford, Rockefeller, and Andrew Mellon, and centimillionaires such as the Vanderbilts, the Astors, and Andrew Carnegie. And where these giants led, the lesser wealthy – like J. P. Morgan, who died in 1914 worth a mere eighty million dollars, Henry Clay Frick, and Samual P. Huntington—soon followed. Not only on the east coast, but also in the Midwest and California, these 'Trans-Atlantic Midases' amassed their millions: in railways, mining, iron and steel, urban real estate, chemicals and automobiles – but not, significantly, in agricultural land.[4]

In Britain, too, the same developments were evident. Between 1809 and 1879, only eleven fortunes were left in excess of two

million pounds; but between 1880 and 1939, there were eighty-three. In the years 1906–12 alone, four mammoth sums were left of more than five million pounds, by Charles Morrison, H. O. Wills, Alfred Beit, and Julius Wernher. Between 1920 and 1930, there were twelve wills proved at four million pounds and above, three of which were greater than ten million.[5] As C. F. G. Masterman had put it in 1909, these were the 'astonishing facts of super-wealth' in twentieth-century Britain. It was, of course, not riches on the American scale: tens of millions of pounds did not signify compared with hundreds of millions of dollars, whatever the rate of exchange. Yet many of the areas in which such wealth was accumulated were the same: gold and diamonds, newspapers, consumer goods, international contracting and finance, but not agricultural land.[6] And, even more importantly, this new wealth dwarfed all except the greatest patrician fortunes. Between 1809 and 1879, some 88 per cent of British millionaires had been landowners, but between 1880 and 1914, the figure dropped to only 33 per cent, and it fell still further thereafter.[7] In short, the real leviathans of wealth were no longer British; or, if they were, they were no longer preponderantly drawn from the old landowning classes.

As A. J. Balfour put it in 1909, 'the bulk of the great fortunes are now in a highly liquid state . . . They do not consist of huge landed estates, vast parks and castles, and all the rest of it.'[8] And the advent of such wealth – often Jewish, often foreign, often American – engendered a real and justified sense of patrician anxiety. Quite rightly, they saw their economic supremacy threatened by this new form of wealth, which was in greater amounts, was in more liquid form, was less vulnerable to political exactions, and carried with it fewer obligations. They feared competition and corruption. Trollope explored these themes very early and very presciently in *The Way We Live Now*, and in 1887, Gladstone warned of the need to be 'jealous of plutocracy, and of its tendency to infect aristocracy, its older and nobler sister.'[9] During the mid-Victorian period, even a small landowner could compete in wealth with most British manufacturers; but from the late nineteenth century onwards, it was only a very tiny minority of the greatest magnates who could rival these new and colossal British fortunes. And even they were out of their depth compared with the new American super-rich.

The second world-wide development that threatened the patricians' financial pre-eminence and security was the growth of the international trade in agricultural produce. The opening up, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, of the prairies and grasslands of America, Canada, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand, combined with cheaper rail transport and fast, purpose-built refrigerated

ships, led to a global glut of grain products and chilled meat that lasted until the 1930s. And as the domestic market in Britain expanded, consumption of these foreign products rose dramatically. In 1870, Britain imported 30 million hundredweights of grain; by 1900 the figure was 70 million; and by the inter-war years, the country was heavily dependent on imported foodstuffs of all kinds.[10] Here was a revolution in agricultural production and domestic consumption of quite unprecedented magnitude. As a result, the country that had once been the first agricultural nation, a self-sufficient producer of its own foodstuffs, suffered a sustained depression about which little could be done for seventy years.[11]

From the late 1870s, the prices of all agricultural products plummeted and, although there were occasional, brief upturns, they stayed depressed until the Second World War. In the prosperous years of mid-Victorian 'High Farming', wheat had averaged between 50 and 55 shillings a quarter; but in the 1880s and 1890s, it fell to 27 shillings, reaching a low point of 22s. 10d. in 1894.[12] By 1914, it had rallied to 30 shillings a quarter, and during the unusual conditions of wartime output and government guarantees, the price doubled. But the repeal of the Corn Production Act in 1921 led to a further slump, so that by the 1930s prices were back to the low levels of the 1890s. Livestock and dairy produce fell less dramatically, but the overall contours were very much the same. Indeed, between 1928 and 1931 alone, the average price of all farm produce fell by one-third.[13] The magnitude of this collapse can hardly be over-emphasized. From 1846 onwards, the prosperity of British agriculture had been dependent on high prices and low imports. But a generation on, those opponents of repeal who had argued that free trade in corn would destroy British agriculture by letting in cheap foreign produce seemed to have been vindicated – and in the most unhappy way possible.[14]

It is clear that this world-wide fall in agricultural prices led to an unprecedentedly gloomy period for British landowners. Undeniably, some contemporaries over-reacted to the late-nineteenth-century depression, there were considerable local variations, and pastoral farming was less hard-hit than arable. But even so, it was impossible to see signs of recovery, there was a continuous contraction of cultivation, and rents collapsed almost everywhere. In England, between the mid-1870s and the mid-1890s, they fell on average by 26 per cent: only 12 per cent in the pastoral north-west but 41 per cent in the arable south-east.[15] In Scotland and Wales, where farming was predominantly pastoral rather than arable, the fall was slightly less: 18.5 and 21 per cent respectively.[16] But in Ireland, where these general developments were exacerbated by the Land League rent strike and judicially adjusted rents, the fall was even greater. Between 1881 and 1902, the Irish Land Commission compulsorily reduced rents by 41 per cent; and even on estates that were never brought before it, the fall over the same period was in the region of 30 per cent.[17]

In general, by the mid-1890s, rents were probably back to where they had been in the early 1840s; by 1914, as prices gradually improved, they had risen again, but were by no means back to their High Farming level. During the First World War, despite the doubling and trebling of agricultural prices, and the consequent enhanced prosperity of the farmers, the landowners themselves were forbidden from putting up rents, and so did not profit from this brief and prosperous period, as their predecessors had done during the Napoleonic Wars.[18] And when rents were finally raised, after 1918, it was usually by only 15 per cent. But even this was merely a brief interlude: for after the repeal of the Corn Production Act in 1921, the slide in prices began again, and landowners were obliged to reduce their rents once more, by as much as 25 per cent. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, remissions of rents were as common as they had been half a century before.[19] By 1933, agricultural rentals were again at the level of 1914, and by 1936 they were back where they had been in 1800: which meant the lowest point of all since 1870.

But in addition, many landowners now found themselves squeezed between what seemed to be inexorably declining income, and outgoings that could not be correspondingly reduced. Almost all estates were burdened with jointures and other such payments, those essential items of family provision and continuity that still had to be met, even when income was reduced. And many were also bearing heavy debts and mortgages, on which fixed interest payments had to be made. In the heady days of the 1850s and 1860s, these burdens had been relatively easily assumed, when landowners had believed that their rentals would at worst remain static and at best continue to rise, so that there would be no difficulties about the payment of interest. But now, with reduced income, such fixed outgoings became much more burdensome. As one authority put it in 1890: 'when times are good, this state of things does not matter much; but when rents fall, the shoe instantly begins to pinch.' And, during the First World War, when interest rates rose from 3.5 per cent to 6 per cent, it pinched even more.[20]

The result was that decline in rentals severely understated the decline in disposable income for many landowners. In 1880, *The Spectator* calculated that for an averagely burdened estate, a fall of 30 per cent in gross income might mean a drop in net revenue of 50 per cent.[21] Put the other way, this meant that fixed charges took up a

larger and larger part of a smaller and smaller income. On a Cambridgeshire estate, in a part of the country where depression hit particularly hard, interest payments took 41 per cent of revenue between 1881 and 1885, but 75 per cent of a much smaller income between 1885 and 1894. The Duke of Devonshire was spending 17 per cent of his disposable income on interest payments in 1874, but 60 per cent by 1880.[22] For landowners in Ireland, the position was even worse. The Land Commissioners had powers to reduce rents compulsorily, but no power to reduce fixed charges correspondingly. In many cases, reductions of 20 to 40 per cent completely wiped out any disposable income. And in times of rent strike, with no income coming in at all, the landowner suffered even more. 'How', one witness asked the Bessborough Commission, 'can he meet his payments, interest, annuities, jointures, on his property, and his other outgoings, if the Land Leaguers induce the tenants to refuse to pay their rents?' How, indeed?[23]

From prices to rental to values, the line of depression ran inexorably. For as the income that land generated declined, its capital value fell by at least 30 per cent. In 1890, English land that had been selling at between thirty and forty years' purchase in the golden age was now fetching only twenty to twenty-five years'. In Wales, the price was higher, at thirty years'; but in Ireland, it was generally as low as fifteen years', and often even less. And, although there was a brief upsurge between 1910 and 1921, in response to the temporary recovery of prices, there was another sudden collapse, amounting to a further 20 per cent, between 1925 and 1931. By the mid-1930s, land was selling for barely one-third of the sum it had fetched in the mid-Victorian period. By then, indeed, it had been so depressed for so long that there were few alive who could remember when it had last prospered, and few who dared predict when it would ever do so again. 'No security', noted *The Economist* at the beginning of it all, 'was ever relied upon with more implicit faith, and few have lately been found more sadly wanting, than English land.'[24]

But the collapse of land values also undermined the whole structure of patrician borrowing. For a fall in the value of land of 30 per cent wiped out the margin left between the value of land as collateral and the amount of the mortgage that had been raised upon it in more prosperous times. As one observer summarized it, 'upon many properties which are heavily charged, the depression has carried away much more than the margin of security'. Under such circumstances, insurance companies like the Royal Exchange, which were among the biggest lenders on landed security, began to 'review their mortgages'.[25] And many attorneys, who were also heavily involved in the mortgage business, did the same. In 1885, the solicitor of the fifth Lord Calthorpe, who had arranged a mortgage on his Acle

estate, gave him the choice of providing more security or of paying off at least £10,000 at once. And if old loans were less secure, new mortgages were virtually impossible to obtain. 'Lawyers', a Herefordshire attorney explained, 'have grown very careful about advancing money upon a mortgage of land, since such extreme caution had to be exercised that the investment is rarely worth the anxiety.'[26]

In Ireland, the picture was even more bleak, as the combination of bad harvests, rent strikes, rural unrest, and compulsory rent reductions only depressed the value of land still further, and so made it even less secure. From 1880 onwards, major British lenders – whether insurance companies or individual solicitors – virtually refused to consider any more advances. One such institution, the Representative Body of the Church of Ireland, had approved 120 such loans between 1871 and 1876, but made only 25 from 1877 to 1925. Between 1866 and 1880, the Scottish Widows Company lent £1.2 million across the Irish Sea. But it then decided to call in these loans, and by 1894, some £850,000 had been repaid.[27] One of their mortgagors was the seventh Duke of Devonshire. In 1890, he owed the company £80,000, secured on his Irish estates, and was asked to begin paying it back at the rate of £10,000 a year. But many landowners, confronted with such abrupt demands for repayment, simply lacked the resources to do so. Indeed, in 1888, the Irish Landowners' Convention unavailingly begged the government to provide state loans with which they might pay off their mortgages and family charges.[28]

What did all this add up to? As Gaskell had foreseen, the result was that the patricians' territorial wealth was made to seem less Himalayan and less secure. The rise of the new plutocracy meant that, with one or two exceptions, landowners were no longer the wealthiest men in the land. And, at the same time, the global glut in agricultural produce, which led to a fall in prices, rentals, and land values, lessened very considerably the room in which members of the landed establishment could conduct their own financial manœuvres. Disposable income, adequate before, shrank alarmingly; fixed charges and interest payments, bearable in normal times, became burdensome; mortgages and encumbrances, safe hitherto, became dangerously large in relation to the diminished value of the land on which they were secured; and additional loans, which had been easily available in times past, were now much more difficult to obtain.[29] In sum, their finances were being squeezed, and their fortunes were being surpassed: in the sixty years from the late 1870s, the grandees and gentry were living in a new and increasingly hostile financial world.

But at the very same time, they were also confronted by a new

14. 'Depressed Dukes.' *Punch*, 30 June 1894.

threat: that of an increasingly predatory state. The most famous example of this was death duties, first introduced by Harcourt in 1894, and levied at 8 per cent on estates of over one million pounds. In fact the rate was relatively low. But at once they were described as 'calamitous', 'terrible', 'disastrous': for in both psychological and financial terms, they made an impact out of all proportion to their size.[30] At a time when confidence in the land was already undermined, they served only to erode it still further. To many estates already burdened with heavy debts, fixed outgoings, and reduced income, the effect of these duties at the margin might be quite crippling. There would be no surplus income to put away in anticipation; there might be no scope for further mortgaging; and loans might be impossible to obtain. It is easy to see why Oscar Wilde put these words into Lady Bracknell's mouth in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, first performed in 1895:

> What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one a position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.

Put less wittily, this meant that from the 1890s, the traditional territorial classes found themselves caught between a world economy that operated to their disadvantage, and British governments that seemed equally ill-disposed. Indeed, they very soon became more so, as death duties were raised inexorably: to 15 per cent from 1909 to 1914, 40 per cent from 1919 to 1930, 50 per cent from 1930 to 1934, and 60 per cent by 1939. There were, it is true, some slight concessions: payment could be spread over eight years (but with interest charged), relief for quick succession was introduced during the First World War, and agricultural land was exempted from the increases of 1925 and 1931.[31] But these counted for little. From 1919, land was valued for death-duty purposes at the current selling price, not – as formerly – on the basis of existing rents: so that at a time when land was very much under-rented, this meant duties became even higher. And the selling value was of the farms individually, not of the estates as a whole, which led to an even greater valuation. Even worse, the Treasury would not accept the land itself in lieu of payment, which meant that in the late 1920s, when the land market was depressed, such grandees as the newly inherited Dukes of Richmond and Montrose were obliged to pay large amounts in interest because they could not find buyers for their estates.[32]

At the same time that successive governments taxed landed capital, they also attacked landed income and capital gains. The most famous instance of this was the Incremental Value Duty and the Undeveloped Land Duty introduced by Lloyd George in his People's Budget of 1909. In fact, they raised little money and were repealed in 1920. But while they lasted, they only heightened the sense of encircling gloom. And even more burdensome was the inexorable rise of income taxes. During the First World War, supertax was introduced for the first time on incomes in excess of £10,000, and it was retained and increased thereafter. In addition, it was levied on gross rather than net income, which was especially disadvantageous to landowners, with their large outgoings on charities and maintenance.[33] The only concessions were that the rating of agricultural land was halved, halved again, and finally abolished in 1896, 1923, and 1929. But this was soon negated by the rising income taxes of the inter-war years. The result was that even the richest of the grandees felt the pinch. As the seventeenth Earl of Derby explained

in 1923, 'taxation at the present moment is so high that I may call myself a tax collector for the government. At present I am not living on my income. I am living on my capital.'[34]

By the inter-war years, even the greatest agricultural properties had become as uneconomic as Derby's comment implied. In 1918, some details were published of the Harwarden estate, where the young squire had been killed during the First World War. On his death, duties were paid that were six times the old Succession Duties, last levied in 1891. And, since taxation had quadrupled during the same period, the net result was that the new owner spent four-fifths of his rental income on rates, taxes, and maintenance, leaving only a small portion for living and annuities.[35] Other, larger properties, were equally blighted. On the Buccleuch estates in Eskdale and Liddesdale, gross revenue was £42,496, but £19,229 of this went on repairs, maintenance, and management, and £22,800 on taxes, leaving a surplus of £467 – and this on an unencumbered property. Overall, Lord Clinton calculated in 1919 that, on a selected group of estates with an average gross rental of £20,300, expenditure on income tax, tithe, and rates took £15,800, leaving the owners with a free income (before fixed payments) of only 4s. 6d. in the pound, compared with 10s. in the pound on an equivalent income derived from the Funds.[36]

So eloquent were these figures that the matter was even discussed in the House of Commons, where one MP summarized the position well: 'It is beyond doubt that English and also Scottish landowners, although some of them may possess apparently enormous rentals, are in reality in a condition of real poverty, unless they have some other source of revenue than the land.'[37] By the inter-war years, many landed estates had ceased to be economically viable, whatever the size of the rent roll. And even non-agricultural incomes of a traditional kind were, in some cases, less extensive than they had once been. In 1918, the Duke of Northumberland's gross income from mineral royalties was £82,450: but of that, he received net only £23,890, the rest having been taken as 5 per cent Mineral Rights Duty, 80 per cent Excess Mineral Rights Duty, plus income tax at 6s. in the pound, and supertax at 4s. 6d. By 1924, he was receiving only 2s. 6d. in the pound from his royalties, to which could be added, in 1931, only 7s. 9d. in the pound from his Alnwick rents.[38]

The combination of reduced incomes, increased exactions, and eroded confidence meant that most patricians were obliged to economize and to retrench, compared with the earlier and more prosperous period when, in retrospect, money had always seemed to be easily available. In the first place, everyday expenditure on conspicuous consumption had to be reduced: the country house might be

let, hunting might be curtailed, the London season might be given up, and residence abroad might be contemplated for a time. The Earls of Verulam were faced with an income that declined from £17,000 in the 1870s to £14,000 in the 1880s. Tradesmen's bills were reduced, some of the servants were dismissed, the London season was cut from five months to two, consumption of alcohol was moderated, and both the big house at Gorhambury and the shooting were let.[39] Well on into the inter-war years, many families followed suit. In 1928, *Country Life* advertised Ingestre Hall, Staffordshire, on lease for seven years, with the option of shooting over 7,880 acres; Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, available with fishing and 6,000 acres of shooting; and Levens Hall in Westmorland, with 1,814 acres of shooting, one and a half miles of salmon fishing, and a grouse moor of 5,200 acres.[40]

Such measures of retrenchment might make it possible for landowners to come to terms with a much-diminished disposable income. But it was equally important to curtail or reduce much larger items of debt-incurring capital expenditure. This was particularly difficult in the case of jointures and portions, for they were the very sinews of family life and continuity, which had to go on if the family was to go on. In 1890, the Earl of Radnor had to make provision for the marriage of his eldest son; but with reduced rents, £100,000 worth of mortgages already incurred, and an annual expenditure on Longford Castle of £13,000, the only way to raise the money was by selling some old masters to the National Gallery for £55,000.[41] By 1899, the Peels of Tamworth, long since decayed from the halcyon days of the Prime Minister, were so indebted that there was no surplus to pay the Dowager Lady Peel's jointure of £350, and the money could be raised only by selling the great Sir Robert's library. And in 1921, a family like the Pryses in Wales found the greatest part of their liabilities derived from family charges from re-settlements of 1880 and 1919.[42]

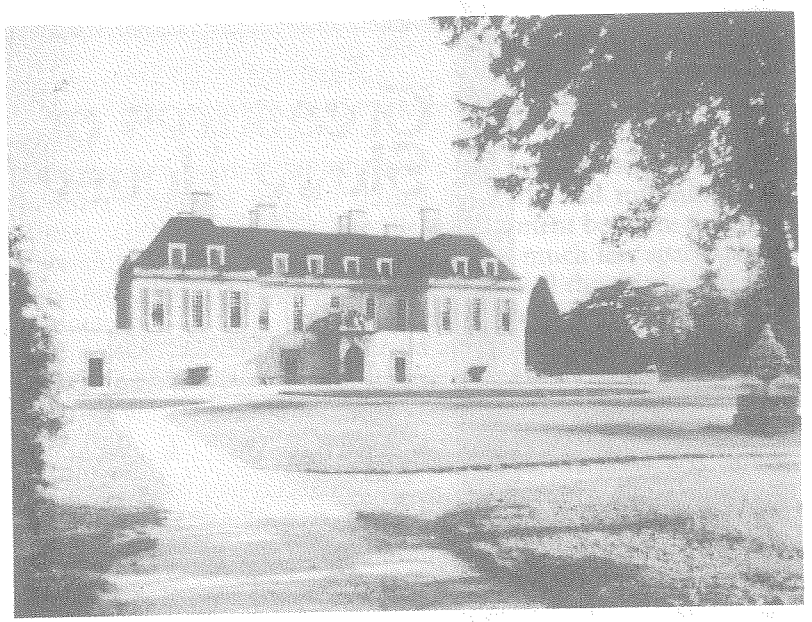
Other forms of large-scale estate expenditure were curtailed more easily and more completely, especially the purchase of agricultural land itself. Even though the period from the late 1870s to the 1930s saw remarkably low prices, few landowners were rich or rash enough to buy on a large scale, as their forebears might have done. There were occasional exceptions: patricians who had outlived their own world, but who were unaware of it, and continued as before; and those with such large incomes that they could still afford to do so. The fifteenth Earl of Derby spent £100,000 on land in Fylde between 1878 and 1888, and on his death left £700,000 for further purchases. The very rich Lord Cadogan bought the Culford estate and mansion in Suffolk for £175,000 in 1890. And in the following

year, the Hon. W. H. Fitzwilliam acquired the Wiganthorpe estate near Malton.[43] But these were among the richest of the super-rich, in two cases they were rounding out family holdings, and even their expenditure came to a halt well before the First World War. For most patricians, the growth and consolidation of great estates had effectively ended by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Equally marked was the decline in spending on agricultural improvement. The massive outlays in the age of High Farming had presupposed the availability of funds, the buoyancy of income and of land values, and an ultimate return on the investment. But from the 1870s, the sustained depression in agriculture undermined all these assumptions and expectations, so that even routine spending was much cut back, while improvements all but came to an end. In July 1886, when advertising for a new agent, Lord Harrowby specified that 'the strictest economy is necessary, and the agent is expected to diminish the large annual outgoings in connection with the estate.'[44] On the Leicester estates at Holkham, and the Abergavenny and Chichester estates in Sussex, expenditure was markedly cut back from the 1880s. By the inter-war years, when income was further reduced, and taxation had risen, along with the cost of labour and repairs, landowners were economizing even more drastically. As the *Estates Gazette* explained in 1935, landowners were no longer in a position to revive agriculture, because they no longer possessed the capital or the confidence to do so.[45]

As the political position of the land became more vulnerable, as the resources of those who held it in large quantities became less secure, and as loans became harder to obtain, there was also much less incentive to dabble in non-agricultural forms of estate exploitation. Lord Scarbrough at Skegness, and Lord de la Warr at Bexhill, were very late and very exceptional, lavishing considerable fortunes on the creation of new seaside resorts. But by then such patrician entrepreneurship was largely a thing of the past: at Eastbourne, from the 1890s, the Devonshires decided that they would, in future, no longer commit so much money to the resort's development, and other landowners with mines, markets, docks, and urban estates seem to have reached the same conclusion.[46] Significantly, when the Dukeries coalfield in Nottinghamshire was most profitably and productively opened up in the inter-war years, the great landowners of the locality were happy to collect their royalties, but left the mining operations entirely to private enterprise: something they would probably not have done a century earlier.[47]

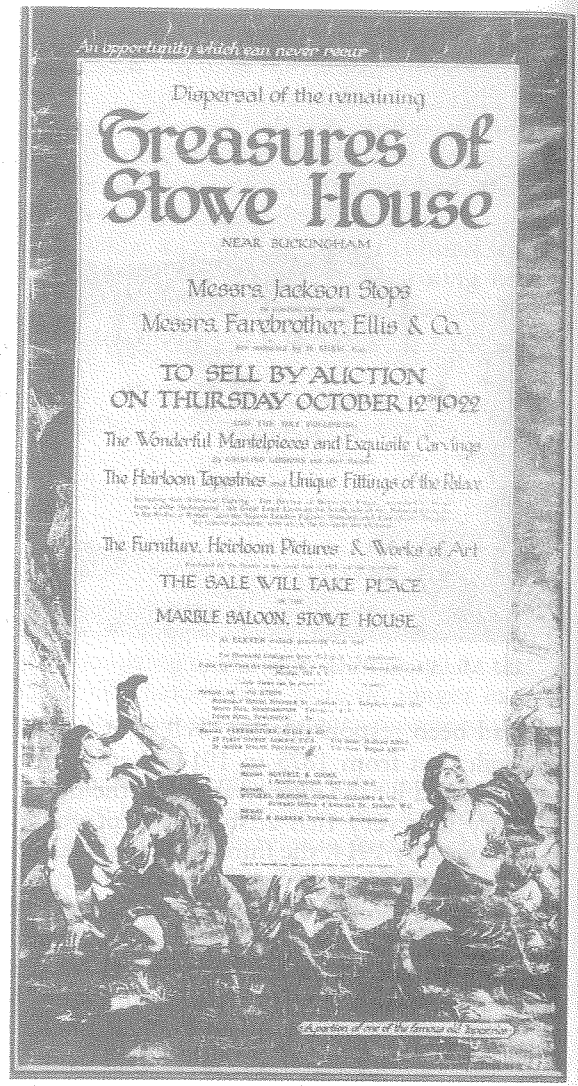
For the same reason, expenditure on country houses was also markedly reduced. Between 1835 and 1874, traditional landowners



15. Middleton Park, Oxfordshire.

had been responsible for well over half of the mansions that were built; but from 1875 to 1914, they commissioned fewer than one-fifth; and by the inter-war years, the figure was even lower. Only a very few very rich aristocrats kept going, and most of them had stopped by 1914: the third Marquess of Bute remodelled Cardiff, the fifteenth Duke of Norfolk restored Arundel, the Duke of Portland extended Welbeck, and Lord Cadogan enlarged Culford.[48] But already, completely new mansions were extremely rare: only Bryanston for the Portmans and Clouds for the Hon. Percy Wyndham stand out before 1914. And in the inter-war years, country-house architects like Lorimer and Lutyens drew their clients from the new international plutocracy rather than from the old landed élite. Ironically, Lutyens' only mansion for an authentic grandee – Middleton Park for the Earl of Jersey in 1935–8 – was positively the last of its kind. And that was the exception that proved the rule, since the Jerseys were closely connected with banking.[49]

In 1921, on the occasion of the sale of Stowe, the *Estates Gazette* remarked, quite without irony: 'It seems improbable that any family, however rich, will ever again built a house nearly a thousand feet long, surrounded by a garden of 4,000 acres.'[50] How right they were. And the same was true of other traditional forms of patrician expenditure, which now came to an abrupt halt. With very few



16. A poster for the 28-day auction of the contents of Stowe in Buckinghamshire in 1922.

exceptions, landowners ceased to be major figures in the sale rooms of the art world – at least as buyers. And their more general patronage of the arts, which had been steadily diminishing from the mid-nineteenth century, dwindled away almost to nothing. Country-house painters like Sargent and de Laszlo still thrived, though – like Lutyens – much of their work was for parvenus rather than patricians. The Beauchamps supported Elgar in his early, struggling years, as did the Sitwells with the young William Walton. And the

Marquess of Anglesey commissioned Whistler to paint the murals that adorn Plas Newydd. But this was a very down-beat conclusion to what had once been the flourishing realm of aristocratic patronage.[51]

Compared with the easy certainties and unarticulated confidence that most patricians had felt during the early and mid-nineteenth century, it is clear that the economic environment between the Great Depression and the Second World War was much less spacious and far less optimistic. From the Reformation until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, land had been seen as the most secure asset economically, which also conferred appropriately real political influence, and unrivalled social status. But from the late 1870s onwards, all these assumptions were drastically eroded and irrevocably reversed: the assurance of supreme, unchallenged wealth was lost; the confidence in the stability and security of the land was undermined; the faith in a future like the past was much diminished; and the demands of an increasingly hostile, predatory, and intrusive state had to be met. Accordingly, economic decline had its effect, not only on landowners' finances, but also on their minds, not just on their wealth, but also on their self-esteem. Economically and psychologically, the grandees and gentry were under attack, on the defensive, and in retreat.

ii. The Breakup of Great Estates

The most impressive evidence of these changed conditions and attitudes was the speed and determination with which many owners sold all or part of their estates, abruptly putting into reverse the centuries-long process of landed accumulation which had reached its zenith during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. As Lord Ailesbury put it in 1911, 'a man does not like to go down to posterity as the alienator of old family possessions.'[52] Yet by that time, that was exactly what he and many others of his class were doing. As land ceased to be economically secure or politically important, and as it seemed to be increasingly vulnerable to acquisitive government measures, patricians no longer looked upon their holdings sentimentally and historically, as family heirlooms, but instead came to regard them rationally and calculatingly as investments. As such, they found that they did not pay, and that they should be disposed of. And that, across the whole of the British Isles, is exactly what they did.

It was in Ireland that the disappearance of the old territorial élite was most complete and where, quite exceptionally, it was brought about by state legislation and at the state's expense. The Land Acts of

1870, 1881, and 1891 began the process, but only very slowly.[53] Landowners wanted to obtain as good a price as possible for their estates, so as to pay off their debts and leave them with something for themselves. But the tenants, who were well aware of the massive fall in land values from the 1880s, were prepared to offer only very low prices which the owners would not accept. In 1881, Lord Fermoy's estate was put up for sale by the Norwich Union Assurance Company, the principal mortgagee: but when the tenants offered only eight years' purchase, it was withdrawn. Likewise, in 1889, the Earl of Bandon offered his lands at twenty-two years' purchase, but the tenants would pay only thirteen. 'There are', observed J. Fitzgerald, 'so many encumbered owners who are being forced by mortgagees and others to sell at ruinous rates that tenants don't understand being asked a fair price.'[54] As one witness put it before the Cairns Commission in 1882, 'To the heavily encumbered landlord, there was no alternative but to sell. But to whom?'[55]

Nevertheless, there were some quite spectacular individual transfers of property, especially in the late 1880s, when the pressure on the landowners from both their mortgagees and their tenants was especially severe. The Marquess of Bath sold 21,000 acres in County Monaghan for £290,054, the Duke of Abercorn 22,700 acres in Tyrone and Donegal for £267,604, Sir Victor Brooke 7,300 acres in County Fermanagh for £83,992, the Marquess of Waterford 9,500 acres in his titular county for £124,556, and the Duke of Leinster 19,000 acres in County Kildare for £240,000.[56] With the exception of Lord Bath, who was withdrawing almost completely, none of these sales was by a landlord who was selling the majority of his Irish acres. In every other case, the landowners were merely slimming down their estates, attracted by offers in the region of fifteen to twenty years' purchase, which were, in the circumstances, too good to refuse. But these sales also suggested that if such prices could be generally obtained in the future, the number of landowners tempted to sell would be much increased. To that extent, Michael Davitt was correct in predicting that the 1881 Land Act was indeed 'a legislative sentence of death by slow process against Irish landlordism.'[57]

But it was only in the 1900s that 'Irish landlordism' went into conspicuous and conclusive liquidation. For the terms of Wyndham's Land Act of 1903, and Birrell's Act passed six years later, were generous enough to both sides to encourage landowners to sell, and tenants to buy. The repayment period for the tenant's loan was extended to 68.5 years, the interest rate was reduced to 3.25 per cent, and a bonus of 12 per cent was given by the government to encourage landlords to sell.[58] The result was a 'rush to purchase' – and a rush to put up for sale – so great that the £5 million a year

initially allocated was eagerly taken up. In late 1903, the Duke of Leinster was very quick off the mark, receiving £676,038 for the remainder of his Kildare estates. And, like him, many other landowners now resolved to liquidate their Irish holdings entirely: great Anglo-Irish grandees like Devonshire, Lansdowne, Fitzwilliam, and Leconfield; and also owners whose lands were exclusively Irish, like Kilmaine, Ranfurly, Wicklow, Fingall, and Meath.[59]

Within ten years of the passing of Wyndham's Act, the landowners of Ireland were in full territorial retreat. Under the legislation of 1870–96, only 2.5 million acres had been transferred; but between 1903 and 1909 alone, some 9 million acres were sold. In 1870, only 3 per cent of Irish holdings were owned by former tenants; by 1908 the figure was 46 per cent, and still rising rapidly. Indeed, by 1912, *Burke's Landed Gentry* felt moved to inquire whether 'there still remains a landed gentry at all in that country, so great has been the compulsory [*sic*] alienation of land in Ireland during the last decade.'[60] By 1914, many of the landed families were still actually resident in Ireland: they retained their houses and perhaps one hundred acres, but no longer a great estate. They were isolated and cut off: from their former tenantry in Ireland, and from the British government across the sea. On the eve of the setting up of the Irish Free State, over three-quarters of the land had been transferred from landlords to tenants. At a conservative estimate, some 11 million acres had changed hands under the UK Irish land legislation, at a cost – to the British taxpayer – of £100 million.[61]

Under the new Irish Free State, the process of territorial dismantlement was completed. The Hogan Act of 1923 put what had previously been the voluntary British system on a compulsory footing, by vesting the remaining land not yet tenant-owned in a reconstituted Land Commission, which paid the former owners a standard price, and then sold it off to the tenants. As a result, a further 3.1 million acres were vested in the Land Commission, at a cost of £21 million, which were gradually conveyed to the tenants. The combined effects of the British and Irish land legislation were that some 15 million out of 17 million acres were transferred from landlords to tenants, at a cost of £150 million in advances.[62] In scale, this was land reform on a par with Bolshevik Russia: the hereditary owners, who had held the land for centuries, now held it no more. It took three decades rather than three years, and the owners were bought out, not expropriated. To that extent, the nationalists were correct in describing the demise of the Irish landowners as a 'bloodless revolution'. But it was a revolution, none the less.

By the 1920s, there were virtually no great Irish estates left: at best, the patricians held on to their ancestral mansion and perhaps the

park, but nothing more. 'Landlordism', the *Estates Gazette* announced towards the close of that decade, 'in the sense of ownership of the land tilled by others, is at an end in Ireland.' Or, as the sixth Marquess of Lansdowne – whose ancestors had owned nearly 120,000 acres – put it in 1937, 'there are, of course, today in Ireland no "landlords" in the old sense of the word.'[63] But the most vivid sense of Irish landowners at the end of the road was caught by Harold Nicolson who, in 1942, visited Lord Powerscourt at his great house in County Wicklow, where his family had once possessed 40,000 acres:

> A great ostentatious eighteenth-century mansion, with a most elaborate Italian garden, and a superb view of the Wicklow mountains . . . We leant upon a gilt balustrade, looking down over the fountains to the great pool between the statues. He said, 'Here I am marooned – the last of the Irish aristocracy, with nobody to speak to.'[64]

In Wales, by contrast, private enterprise accomplished unaided a similar transformation. Even in the 1880s and 1890s, the market for land was relatively buoyant, partly because, in a country where pastoral farming predominated, the price of land remained high, and partly because the tenantry were eager to buy. In 1887, it was claimed that thirty years' purchase was 'the rule rather than the exception'; and by 1890, prices as high as thirty-five to forty-five years' purchase were 'readily obtainable'.[65] In Cardiganshire alone, major owners like Pryse and Lisburne parted with 50,000 acres; and between 1894 and 1897, Lord Ancaster sold his Gwydir estate in North Wales. But the most spectacular sale was that of the 26,000-acre Monmouthshire estate of the Duke of Beaufort, which included eight castles as well as Tintern Abbey, and which was disposed of gradually between 1898 and 1901. And this was a portent of things to come: between 1901 and 1910, Lords Glanusk, Ashburnham, Denbigh, and Winchilsea sold land in Wales. Like the Beauforts, they were primarily English owners, who were as yet selling off only peripheral properties: the great Welsh heartland estates remained essentially intact.[66]

But from 1910 to 1914, there was a dramatic change, as almost every major Welsh owner whose territorial identity was mainly within the Principality began to dispose of parts of their estates. Among the foremost names in the market were Lord Powis in Montgomeryshire, Lord Harlech at Criccieth, Lord Wimborne in Glamorgan, the Duke of Westminster in Flint, the Rhug estate in Merioneth, and the Williams-Wynn holdings in Denbigh and Montgomery.[67] Such widespread selling by such illustrious and important

Welsh proprietors showed their real anxieties about the future of landownership in the immediate aftermath of Lloyd George. As one contemporary remarked, with only slight exaggeration, 'it has become very general to break up large estates.' Indeed, although the war slowed the market down, sales continued, as owners remained apprehensive about the future. In 1915, the Beauforts severed their connection with Wales completely by selling their 5,000-acre Brecon estate, and in the following year, the Marquess of Abergavenny followed suit, by disposing of his only Welsh property, 2,500 acres in Monmouth.[68]

With improved rentals and increased values in the immediate aftermath of the war, every major Welsh landlord placed at least part of his estate on the market, and some went a great deal further. Among the most famous were Major George Cornwallis-West, who sold Ruthin Castle and 11,000 acres in Denbigh for £76,000; the outlying parts of the Gladstone estate at Hawarden which went for £112,000; Lord Kensington's holdings in Pembrokeshire which fetched £100,000; the Raglan estates in Monmouthshire which realized £105,000; the Cofyn Maltby lands in Glamorgan which brought in £227,000; the Bute agricultural lands in the same county which sold for £124,000; and the Williams-Bulkeley estates, including Beaumaris Castle, which fetched £110,000.[69] There was a further, brief surge in 1924–5, when the remaining parts of the Penrhyn estate in Caernarfon, the Bute agricultural estates in Glamorgan, and the Pontypool estate in Monmouthshire were sold. But then the boom burst, and in 1927 Lord Bagot failed to sell his Denbighshire holdings.[70]

Thereafter, there were still occasional sales, as in 1930, when the Marquess of Londonderry disposed of 9,000 acres in Merioneth, and in 1938, when the recently succeeded Lord Harlech was obliged to part with 1,424 acres of his Brogyntn estate near Oswestry, and when the Tredegar settled estates came into the market. But by then, the major changes had taken place: the great transnational moguls had pulled out almost completely, and the largest Welsh proprietors were very much reduced. As the *Montgomery Express* had put it in 1919, in words that applied to the country as a whole, 'little short of an agrarian revolution is being witnessed in central Wales, where large tracts of territory are continually tumbling into the market.'[71] In 1909, only 10 per cent of Wales was owner-occupied; but by 1941, the figure was 39 per cent. Only in Ireland was the traditional territorial ascendancy vanquished more completely. As Kenneth Morgan correctly summarizes it: 'only a few great houses remained', while 'the gentry subsided as if they had never been.'[72]

In Scotland, as in Ireland, many of the estates were very large; and,

as in Wales, the breakup was under the auspices of private initiative rather than that of the state. Once again, sales were sluggish in the period from the 1880s to the 1900s, although there was no shortage of landowners wanting to sell. In 1888–9, Lord Aberdeen sold his estates at Cromar, and in 1891 the Marquess of Tweeddale disposed of the outlying parts of his Roxburghshire lands. In 1897 the Marquess of Queensberry parted with 5,800 acres at Kinmount, Dumfriesshire, which had formed nearly half his holdings, for £130,000; and in the 1900s, the Eglinton estate was largely liquidated in Ayrshire.[73] But the most sustained seller in Scotland in this period was the Duke of Fife, who had originally owned very nearly 250,000 acres in Aberdeen, Banff, and Elgin, but who, between 1880 and 1899, sold off much of his land on the grounds that he preferred smallholdings. On the whole, though, the market was as slack as in Ireland: large, wild, and barren estates, often remotely situated and in an inhospitable climate, were easy to let for the game, but unattractive to sell.[74]

But as in Wales, the sales gathered pace between 1910 and 1914, sometimes limited to the outlying part of a vast highland agglomeration, but sometimes encompassing the whole estate itself. In June 1910, the Earl of Perth sold his Strathallan, Tullibardine, and Machany properties, amounting to 7,322 acres.[75] Other major sellers in these pre-war years included the Duke of Argyll, who put the Island of Tiree on the market; the Menzies family, who obtained £260,000 for their 70,000-acre estate and castle in Perthshire; Sir Frederick Johnstone, who sold his 14,462-acre Westerhall estate in Dumfries for £96,327; and the Earl of Kintore, who liquidated his entire holdings in Kincardine and Aberdeen – worth £22,000 a year – for £175,000. But the most astounding news of all in the Scottish property market broke in July 1914, when Knight, Frank, and Rutley announced that they were shortly going to put 330,000 acres of the Duke of Sutherland's massive northern latifundia on the market.[76]

The war led to postponement of this and other sales, although in 1916 the Earl of Erroll sold his Slains Castle estate of 4,200 acres, which severed his territorial connections with Scotland completely.[77] But as soon as peace was declared, the market boomed again, with the Duke of Sutherland taking the lead. In the autumn of 1918, he offered 238,000 acres, and in the next year added a further 114,000, including Dornoch Castle itself. By then, many of the greatest lairds were in the market: Lord Lovat sold 100,000 acres of deer forest and grouse moor in Inverness, and Lord Aberdeen sold 50,000 acres of the Haddo estate for £200,000, 'the largest break-up sale of high-class agricultural land that has ever taken place in the

United Kingdom.'[78] Between 1920 and 1922, the Duke of Portland sold in Ayrshire, Lord Carmichael in Peebles, the Earl of Airlie in Perth and Forfar, and the Earl of Strathmore in Teesside. And some of the greatest of the Scottish grandees began to follow the Sutherlands' lead: Sir Samuel Scott and Cameron of Lochiel sold, respectively, 60,000 and 110,000 acres in Inverness; the Duke of Argyll disposed of Tiree, Lismore, and Benmore, amounting to 50,000 acres; the Duke of Hamilton put 20,000 acres in Linlithgow and Stirling on the market; and the Breadalbanes parted with 40,000 acres in Perthshire, including Taymouth Castle itself.[79]

As in Wales and England, the market for Scottish land stagnated during the mid-1920s, which created great difficulties for the newly inherited Dukes of Richmond and Montrose, who were trying unavailingly to sell off parts of their vast inheritance so as to raise money for death duties.[80] But as the *Estates Gazette* predicted, 'when prices improve, it is probable that a good deal more Highland property will come on to the market.' And so it did – although in the main it was grouse moors and sporting estates, rather than prime agricultural land. In 1928, the Duke of Atholl made extensive sales in Perthshire, and the Duke of Montrose began to sell his Stirling, Lanark, and Dumbarton holdings, including Ben Lomond. Between 1934 and 1937, the Duke of Richmond finally succeeded in divesting himself of his extensive estates in Banff, Aberdeen, and Moray. The Breadalbanes, having already liquidated their 250,000 acres in Perth in the 1920s, sold off an equivalent amount in Argyll between 1934 and 1936. And where these giant proprietors led, such smaller owners as the Earl of Moray in Perth, and Macpherson of Cluny in Inverness, followed suit.[81]

Inevitably, such spectacular Scottish sales attracted much attention: 'on the sentimental side', noted the *Estates Gazette*, 'it is impossible not to regret the disappearance of some of the old northern families from their ancient moors and glens.'[82] The early disposal of entire estates before the First World War, the sheer size of many of the sales thereafter, and the dramatic recovery of the market in the 1930s were all quite remarkable. Between 1912 and 1920, Knight, Frank and Rutley alone claimed to have sold 1.6 million Scottish acres, equivalent to more than one-twelfth of the land area of the country.[83] Some ancient families, both great and small, disappeared almost completely, like the Errolls and the Breadalbanes. But others, like the Sutherlands, the Argylls, and the Atholls, were owners of such vast estates that, even after selling several hundred thousand acres, they remained substantial magnates. For this reason, and also because in many places estates were sold *en bloc* and not in lots, the demise of the landed establishment was less

complete than in Wales: only about 30 per cent of Scottish land was now owner-occupied, compared with over 40 per cent in the Principality. But even so, the result was a dramatic and spectacular transformation.

In England, likewise, there was a strong desire to sell from the 1880s, and the passing of the Settled Lands Act made it possible for tenants for life to do so more easily. 'Were there any effective demand for the purchase of land', wrote the Duke of Marlborough in 1885, 'half the land of England would be in the market tomorrow.'[84] But as in Scotland and Ireland, the prevailing prices were so low – and the demand was so weak – that very few sales actually took place, as most landowners hung on, defiantly or desperately, in the hope of better times. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the Duke of Newcastle and Lords Southampton, Ripon, Carlisle, Hardwicke, and Tollemache were all successful in selling part of their estates. But the list of those who tried and failed was at least as long: the Duke of Leeds, and Lords Rodney, Wilton, Cholmondeley, Westmorland, and Saye and Sele. As late as 1905, there were still almost insurmountable difficulties in disposing of estates 'in a block'.[85]

But in the years immediately before the First World War, the combination of slightly improved agricultural conditions and Lloyd George's anti-landlord campaigns meant that the market picked up. In 1909, the Duke of Bedford caused a sensation by putting his Thorney estate on the market, 'in deference to the social and legislative tendencies of the day.' Having failed to sell it in its entirety to the crown, it was bought piecemeal by the tenants for £566,000. 'We cannot doubt', noted one authority, 'that, as time goes on, the same sentiment will weigh with other landowners.'[86] And so, indeed, it did. In the very next year, Walter Long, the quintessential landed gentleman in politics, began to sell his Wiltshire estate, and he was only one of many. By June 1910, some 72,000 acres were on offer in thirty-six English counties, and the figures rose each year until 1913. In 1912, nineteen noblemen were listed as offering large estates, including the Duke of Sutherland, who sold all his Trentham and Lilleshall lands before the war for £400,000. By late 1914, some 800,000 acres of English land had changed hands for about £20 million. As the *Estates Gazette* noted, 'the unanimity of large English landlords in selling their estates clearly points to some great change in the condition of affairs in this country.'[87]

During the war, the market slowed down, but transactions still continued 'with a briskness which is astonishing in the present circumstances', as the Dukes of Beaufort, Westminster, St Albans, and Manchester, and Lords Somers, Normanton, Scarbrough, Londonderry, and Shrewsbury put land up for sale.[88] But it was the end

of the war that really saw the market surge ahead. In the spring of 1919, Lords Aberdeen, Aylesford, Beauchamp, Cathcart, Middleton, Northampton, Petre, Tollemache, and Yarborough were among the leading vendors. There were in aggregate some half a million acres of English land up for sale, and in the year as a whole, twice that amount was actually sold. Then, in 1920, the records were broken again, as the sellers included the Dukes of Leeds, Beaufort, Marlborough, Grafton, and Northumberland. In addition, the Duke of Rutland sold a large part of his Belvoir holdings for £1.4 million; the Duke of Norfolk parted with 20,000 acres of his Yorkshire estate; and Lord Portman sold in Somerset and Dorset, as did Lord Dudley at Great Witley in Worcestershire.[89]

In 1921–2, with the beginning of a new depression in agriculture and in the aftermath of the repeal of the Corn Production Act, the boom broke, and the turnover was only half the previous year. But even so, there were some illustrious sellers: the Duke of Northumberland in Surrey and Yorkshire, Lord Ilchester in Somerset, and Lord Willoughby de Broke at Compton Verney. In 1923–5, the market picked up again briefly, and Lords Middleton, Howard, Portman, Eldon, Tankerville, and Brownlow all disposed of more property.[90] But by the late twenties, the market was so depressed that the Marquess of Ailesbury could sell only 25,000 acres of Savernake for £10 an acre. In 1930, the Duke of Leeds sold Hornby Castle and 6,000 acres in Yorkshire, and Lord Verulam parted with 5,000 acres of his Gorhambury estate adjacent to St Albans. In 1932, there were two major sales, of the Savile estates in Yorkshire and of Lord Ashburton's lands in Hampshire.[91] In 1934, the Portman trustees sold the Culford estate, which the family had purchased only forty years before. By the end of the decade, the market seemed to be picking up again, and major sellers included the Duke of Norfolk in Lincolnshire, the Duke of Portland in Northumberland, Lord Stanley of Alderley in Cheshire, and the Rufford Abbey estates of the Savile family in Nottinghamshire.[92]

Speaking in the House of Commons in December 1924, Edward Wood observed that there was 'a silent revolution in progress . . . We are, unless I mistake it, witnessing in England the gradual disappearance of the old landed classes.'[93] He was not at all mistaken. In the years immediately before and after the First World War, some six to eight million acres, one-quarter of the land of England, was sold by gentry and grandees. In Wales and Scotland, the figure was nearer one-third, and in Ireland it was even higher.[94] Across the whole of the British Isles, the change between the late 1870s and the late 1930s was remarkable, as five hundred years of patrician landownership had effectively been halted and reversed in seventy. The extent of

this transformation was well summarized by Bernard Shaw, who set his play *Back to Methuselah* on the west coast of Ireland in the year 3000 AD, and included in it this piece of dialogue:

> Elderly gentleman: I am speaking the plainest English. Are you the landlord?
>
> The woman (shaking her head): There is a tradition in this part of the country of an animal with a name like that. It used to be hunted and shot in the barbarous ages. It is quite extinct now.[95]

iii. The Disposal of Non-agricultural Assets

Psychologically and symbolically, as well as economically and financially, the sale of so much land so quickly by so many was the most significant evidence of the transformation and decline of what had once been the British landed establishment. But this was by no means the only way in which landowners divested themselves of their accumulated possessions during this period. When agricultural acres were hard to sell (as they often were) and when sentiment dictated that they should be retained at all cost (as it sometimes did), many landowners preferred to realize alternative assets, which could find more ready buyers and also realize a much better price: collieries and minerals, docks and harbours, building estates and market halls, country houses and London mansions, works of art and family heirlooms. So, in the years from the 1880s until the Second World War, many notables divested themselves of much more than just their broad acres. In other ways, too, the great accumulators had become the great dispersers.

The most well-publicized example of this was the progressive disposal of patrician art collections. When they had been the richest élite in the western world, the grandees (and gentry) of Britain had bought from impoverished continental aristocrats. But now they in turn had become relatively impoverished, and a new and even richer élite had come into being across the Atlantic, appropriately dubbed by Berenson the 'squillionaires'. And so the great works of art moved west once more, to adorn the Fifth Avenue mansions and the Newport 'cottages' of the new American plutocracy. Possessed of the greatest wealth yet accumulated, determined to acquire the trappings of cultural decency, and assisted by experts like Berenson and dealers like Duveen, the wealthy men and women of America effectively created the modern international art market between the 1880s and the 1930s.[96] For at the very time when they wanted to buy, there were many British owners who wanted (and needed) to

sell, while the passing of the Settled Lands Act of 1882 made it much easier than before for such heirlooms to be disposed of.

Three particular landed families set the pattern for such dispersals. In 1875 and 1878, the Munros of Novar auctioned their collection of Turners and old masters for £100,000. (They were later to sell their Raphael Madonna for a great deal more.) On a much larger scale, the Duke of Hamilton sold the entire contents of Hamilton Palace in July 1882: 2,213 lots of paintings, glass, enamel, and furniture which realized the unprecedented sum of £397,562.[97] Not to be outdone, the much more impoverished Duke of Marlborough disposed of many of Blenheim's greatest treasures. In June 1875, he had already sold the Marlborough gems for 35,000 guineas, and had followed this in 1883 with the disposal of the Blenheim enamels and old master drawings. But the largest sale, between 1884 and 1886, was of the great collection of paintings. Initially, the Duke offered twenty-five of them to the National Gallery, for £400,000. The offer was refused, and instead, the Raphael Madonna and the Van Dyck *Charles I on Horseback* were bought by the nation for £87,500. But the rest, which included works by Breughel, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Rubens, Claude, Holbein, Kneller, and Lely, along with porcelain and miniatures, were sold in July and August 1886.[98]

During the next thirty years, many landed families followed suit. Between 1886 and 1902, Lord Dudley parted with china, old masters, and jewels worth £240,000. In 1892, the Spencers sold their magnificent library to Mrs John Rylands for £250,000; the Earl of Orford's books went in two lots in 1895 and 1902; and the Crawfords disposed of their stamps and historical manuscripts in three sales between 1902 and 1914. In 1905, Lord Tweedmouth sold old masters worth £48,895; in 1907 the Duke of Fife auctioned 150 pictures from Duff House; and in 1913 J. P. Morgan bought the Knole tapestries, after the Sackvilles had impoverished themselves in a lawsuit, for $325,000.[99] Other sales were more bizarre. In 1899, Lord Francis Hope of Deepdene was prevented by the courts from selling the Hope Diamond for £18,000. But by then, he had already disposed of family pictures worth £120,000. And in 1904, the trustees of the Marquess of Anglesey sold the entire contents of Beaudesert and Anglesey Castle, which included jewelled walking sticks, paste diamonds, silken nightshirts, and 'an amazing collection of unnecessary gear.'[100]

But with works of art, as with broad acres, it was the anxiety engendered between 1909 and 1914 that really accelerated sales. In 1909 and 1910, the total value of works of art exported was over one million pounds, the highest ever figure. Among the foremost paintings were Raphael's *Three Graces* and Fra Angelico's *Last Judgement* –

Mr. Widener Pays More Than $500,000 for Raphael's "Madonna and Child"

17. Extract from *The New York Herald*, 7 Feb. 1914, on the acquisition of the Small Cowper Madonna by P. A. B. Widener.

formerly owned by Lord Dudley – the Marquess of Exeter's *Petrus Christus*, the Marquess of Lothian's *Virgin and Child* by Rubens, one Rembrandt each from Lord Ashburnham and Lord Ilchester, two Rubenses from Blenheim, and a Gainsborough from Knole.[101] Other important sales at this time included a Holbein from the Duke of Norfolk's collection for £70,000, and Rembrandt's *The Mill*, which Lord Lansdowne sold to P. A. B. Widener for $500,000. Three years later, Widener scored an even bigger coup, when he obtained the 'small' Madonna by Raphael for $565,000, from Lady Desborough, who had inherited it from her aunt, the widow of the last Lord Cowper. Predictably, there were public outcries about the dispersal of the nation's artistic heritage, and of the financial pressure exerted by the government that was forcing landowners to respond in this way. 'The drain that is going on', one expert observed, 'may be expected to continue', thanks to 'the combined pressures of taxes and temptation.'[102]

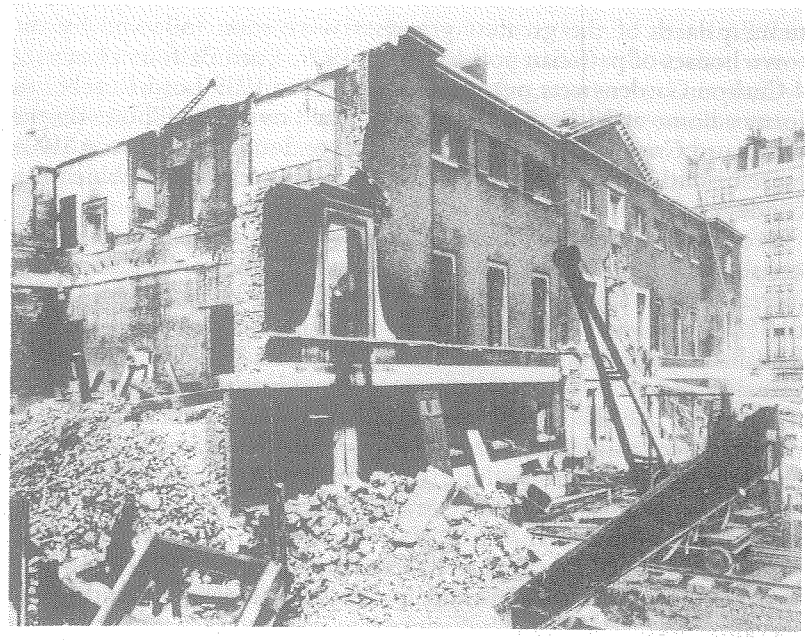
After the war, that was precisely what happened, as the art market was re-established and prices soared higher than ever before. The Duke of Hamilton inaugurated this second phase by selling a further £242,000 worth of silver, furniture, and paintings; and he was soon followed by the Duke of Leeds, who disposed of the contents of Hornby Castle, including its Canalettos, for £85,000. But the most spectacular sale was that by the Duke of Westminster, who accepted a price rumoured to be between £200,000 and £750,000 from Samuel Huntington for *The Blue Boy* and *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse*.[103] In the mid-1920s, when the land market stagnated, the sales of art went on: Lord Brownlow's pictures from Ashridge and Carlton House Terrace fetched £120,000; some of the Spencer art collection crossed the Atlantic; and Lady Desborough sold her second inherited Cowper Madonna, this time to Andrew Mellon for $875,000. Even in the depths of the depression, there were more major sales, including the paintings from Dorchester House, the marbles from Lansdowne House, and the pictures, furniture, and books from Lambton Castle. And in 1938, the contents of Norfolk House were auctioned by Christies, and the Savile treasures from Rufford Abbey, including sixty panels of tapestry, also went under the hammer.[104]

In an age used to the 'Getty Factor' and the National Heritage Fund, these events seem almost commonplace, and the prices rather on the low side. But the impact on contemporaries was very great, for they were well aware that it portended the breakup of many great patrician art collections, and their irrevocable dispersal across the Atlantic. To philistines like the second Duke of Westminster, who did not care about art and were happy to pocket the money, this did

not matter. But to a man like Lord Crawford, who regarded his family collections at Haigh as a sacred trust, the prospect of losing them was almost unendurable. 'They form', he recorded in 1932, when it seemed he might have to sell extensively, 'the apanage of our family, and their loss will cause us profound distress. Books and pictures combine to make Haigh one of the great and famous houses of England – stripped of these treasures, the place would be uninhabitable.' Yet this was the shape of things to come; as taxes rose, houses were gradually denuded of their treasures, and pictures, books, and precious objects passed to America, never to return. At best, 'Victorian openhandedness' was replaced by 'elegant economy'; at worst, dispersal was sometimes total.[105]

Many of these famous art sales – of some or all of the Lansdowne, Westminster, and Holford collections, for example – were occasioned by the disposal of the great family palaces in London that had once housed them. As early as 1912, it was rumoured that the Duke of Sutherland was about to sell Stafford House to Sir William Lever. 'It is rare indeed', the *Estates Gazette* rightly noted, 'that a family voluntarily parts with its town palace.' And the same journal could not help noticing the difference between the grandee who owned it, and the rumoured purchaser – the son of a Bolton grocer, who had started work in his father's shop at the age of sixteen.[106] In fact, it was not until 1916 that Leverhulme (as he had by then become) bought the palace, renamed it Lancaster House in honour of his home county, and subsequently presented it to the government. In the same year, the Duke of Westminster vacated Grosvenor House, which became the headquarters of the Ministry of Food for the rest of the war. Eventually, in 1924, Leverhulme purchased this palace as well. On his death, it was demolished, and shops, flats, and a hotel were constructed on the site.[107]

By then the gradual but inexorable disappearance of the great London palaces was a well-recognized trend. 'The tendency of the great territorial families', noted the *Estates Gazette* as it drew the obvious parallel, 'to sell a considerable proportion of their land is now extending to their expensive town houses.' Early in 1919, Lord Salisbury sold his house in Arlington Street, which had been the Cecils' London home for generations, for £120,000. In the same year, Lord Dartmouth disposed of his great mansion in Mayfair, and the Duke of Devonshire parted with Devonshire House, on the north side of Piccadilly, for three-quarters of a million pounds. The next to go, in 1928, was Dorchester House in Park Lane, which was again demolished and replaced by a hotel.[108] Soon after, Lansdowne House, built by Robert Adam, and occupying virtually the whole



18. The demolition of Devonshire House, Piccadilly.

southern side of Berkeley Square, disappeared as well. To a man with a strong and aesthetic sense of the past, like Lord Crawford, it was all very sad: 'Lansdowne House is about to fall into the hands of the housebreakers . . . Dorchester House is now level with the ground . . . I remember so many London palaces disappearing, in fact one can count on one hand those which survive, and soon they must be doomed before long.'[109]

He was quite correct, as sales and demolitions continued unabated during the 1930s. In 1931, Chesterfield House, the home of Lord Harewood, was put on the market, where it joined Sunderland, Curzon, and Brooke Houses. In the same year, Lord Derby decided to dispose of his family's grand mansion in Stratford Place, and soon afterwards his son Lord Stanley acquired a much more modest town residence in Belgrave Square. In 1934, the dowager Duchess of Rutland sold 16 Arlington Street for £70,000, the town house of the Manners family for over a century, which had been empty for nearly a decade. Three years later, Crewe House in Curzon Street was sold, and so was Norfolk House, St James's Square, which the young duke had been trying to sell since 1930, and which was now demolished to make way for flats and offices.[110] And these sump-

tuous palaces of the greatest grandees were soon followed by the town houses of patrician politicians. In 1929, Lord Balfour's house at 4 Carlton Gardens was put up for sale, and in 1939 Lord Rosebery's former home at 38 Berkeley Square fetched over £1 million. By the time Lord Crawford attended a party at Londonderry House in 1937, he reluctantly concluded that 'this is the last great house which can conduct entertaining on this scale.'[111]

From the disposal of London palaces to the disposal of country houses was but a step, often occasioned by the same pressure of increased costs and the same allure of alternative investments. Before the 1870s, it was very rare indeed for country houses to be sold or demolished. Most families were extremely tenacious in retaining the mansion and grounds, and devised elaborate methods of transference if the male line died out. And houses that were pulled down had usually been accidentally damaged beyond repair, or were being demolished so that something more modern and more grandiose might be put in its place. But gradually from the 1880s, and more markedly from the First World War, these trends, too, were put into reverse.[112] Many houses that had been extended during the high-Victorian period to accommodate the unprecedented numbers of servants, were substantially reduced in size by partial demolition. Some families, who sold off subsidiary estates, decided to part with their subsidiary houses as well. Others, who were selling out altogether, often disposed of the park and mansion at the sametime. And in a growing number of instances, where no individual buyer could be found, the house might be demolished completely.

As the pages of *Country Life* eloquently demonstrate, the sale of patrician mansions, by such firms as Knight, Frank and Rutley, became a flourishing business during the inter-war years. In Shropshire, for instance, 53 of the 173 principal seats changed hands between 1922 and 1934, and this in an English county relatively remote, conservative, and obscure. In the 1920s, such houses tended to go to private purchasers: Lord Dudley sold Witley Court in Worcestershire to Sir Herbert Smith, a Kidderminster carpet manufacturer; and Lord Willoughby de Broke disposed of Compton Verney to a soap-boiler maker and racehorse owner.[113] But by the 1930s, this market was largely saturated, and country houses were more likely to find institutional rather than individual purchasers. As a result, Battle Abbey, Stowe, Culford, and Bryanston became public schools; Taymouth Castle and Wickham Court in Kent became hotels; and Escrick Park in Yorkshire was converted into flats. Significantly, in 1930, when the Marquess of Londonderry put his Welsh mansion, Plas Machynlleth, on the market separately from its 9,000-acre estate, the advertisement noted that 'if not required, the house is highly suitable for a hotel or school.'[114]

But neither private nor institutional purchasers could absorb all the country houses coming on to the market, especially those that were very large or very remote, and sooner or later, many were inevitably destroyed. 'When the war began', noted the *Estates Gazette*, 'no man would have ventured to prophecy that one of its consequences would be the demolition of many a stately building cherished for generations.'[115] Yet such was, indeed, the case. Among the most famous examples were Drayton Manor, the pathetic symbol of the decline and fall of the Peel family; Witley Court, which did not long survive the departure of the Dudleys; Frampton Court in Dorset, the home of Sheridan's descendants; Hornby Castle, once the seat of the Duke of Leeds; and Debden Hall in Essex, built by Henry Holland. And some houses experienced fates even more bizarre. Sutton Scarsdale, once the home of a branch of the Arkwright family, was sold to an American buyer, and three of its rooms were finally reconstituted in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And it was reported that Sudbrooke Holme in Lincolnshire was 'likely to be purchased by a British film company, who proposed to burn it to the ground in order to produce a spectacular scene on the cinematograph.'[116]

There are no absolutely accurate figures available for the destruction of British country houses during this period; but those that do exist indicate an unmistakable trend. From 1870 to 1919, some 79 mansions were destroyed in England, Wales, and Scotland. But between 1920 and 1939, the figure was 221. 'It is', noted the *Estates Gazette*, 'melancholy to watch the disappearance of these stately places, and the concurrent decay of the class which once thought them necessary.'[117] But even this was as nothing compared with the much greater, and more malevolently motivated destruction of Irish country houses during the 'troubles' of 1919–24, when those patricians who had stayed on even after they had lost their estates now found themselves driven from their homes. In County Clare alone, some fifty or sixty houses were destroyed, being the majority of the élite's homes. In County Kerry, where once the Lansdownes had lorded it over a hundred thousand acres, Dereen was gutted in 1922, and the gardens were plundered. 'There is', the sixth marquess recalled sadly, 'probably not a gentleman's house in the district which has not been destroyed or threatened with destruction.'[118]

The real extent to which country houses became burdensome to their owners in the inter-war years is well illustrated in the case of Philip Kerr, who became Lord Lothian in 1930, and inherited 30,000 agricultural acres in Norfolk and the Scottish lowlands. The estate had paid nothing net since the war, so that his predecessor had survived only by living off mineral royalties and dividends from mining shares.[119] In addition, Lothian inherited death duties of £300,000, and four grand houses: Ferniehirst Castle, a border strong-

19. Lord Lothian.

20. Blickling Hall, Norfolk.

hold on a cliff by the upper waters of the Jed; Newbattle Abbey, a large seventeenth-century mansion by the Esk; Blickling Hall, an exquisite Tudor house in Norfolk; and Monteviot, a Scottish baronial pile. As a bachelor, busy in Oxford and London, Lothian neither needed nor could he afford such a clutch of mansions, and systematically divested himself of them. Ferniehirst was let to the Scottish Youth Hostel Association; Newbattle was transferred to the Scottish universities, and became an educational centre for summer schools and residential courses; Monteviot was reserved as the one remaining family home; and Blickling was left by Lothian to the National Trust, to whom it passed on his death in 1940.

It was through Lothian's desire to hand over Blickling to the Trust that the problem of country houses first became widely publicized.[120] In 1934, he offered the house to the Trust on his death, together with 4,500 acres to provide an endowment. But although the Trust already owned some houses, such as Barrington Court in Somerset, it was not legally empowered to accept land or other gifts as an endowment. Accordingly, Lothian began to campaign for legislation that would enable the Trust to accept country houses on such conditions. 'Within a generation', he warned, 'hardly any of the larger historic houses of Britain . . . would be lived in, certainly not by the families that created them.' In 1937, an act was duly passed, allowing former owners of country houses to remain as tenants, while transferring the actual ownership to the Trust.[121] From the latter's standpoint, it was a far-sighted and innovative development; from the standpoint of the British landed classes, it was but further indication that some patricians could no longer afford to live in the homes that their ancestors had created.

Works of art, town palaces, and country mansions did not themselves generate revenue: they expressed status. On the other hand, they were expensive to acquire, to create, and to maintain, and they tied up capital that could be realized only by selling. But other non-agricultural assets did indeed generate income, in many cases more extensive than agricultural rental: urban estates in London or the provinces, docks and harbours, markets and mines. Yet here, too,

there was during this period the same dramatic about-turn in policy: from acquisition to dispersal. The chronology of sales – bunching either side of the First World War, but with a buildup before and a continuing trickle thereafter – is by now familiar. And so, in essence, are the reasons: in the case of urban estates, there were fears for the future of real property; in the case of docks, harbours, and markets, the return on investment was often low; and in the case of minerals, it was because the mining industry was increasingly depressed, and the revenue was so severely taxed. In short, it was possible to make a safer investment, and obtain a greater return, elsewhere.

In London, the radical attacks on slum ground-landlords in the 1880s frightened many patrician owners, as did Lloyd George's onslaught in the era of Limehouse. And the chronology of early sales very much reflects this. In 1888, Lord Salisbury sold £200,000 worth of property in the Strand for commercial development, instead of creating new leases for himself, as would have been customary in earlier times.[122] In 1891, Lord Calthorpe disposed of his City Road building estate, when the leases were about to fall in, because the low quality of the houses meant he feared large-scale expenditure and widespread public criticism. And in 1902–3, Lord Kensington sold his London ground rents for £865,000, which established 'a record in the annals of the landmarket.'[123] But the most spectacular pre-war sale was still to come. As late as 1897, the Duke of Bedford's agent was advising against selling the Covent Garden estate, but to hold on and to augment it when possible. Yet by 1913, 'profound misgivings as to the future of real property, especially in towns', persuaded the Duke to part with it for £2 million. This sale, of an estate that had been in the Russell family since 1552, created a sensation similar to that resulting from the earlier decision to sell Thorney: 'a shock of surprise that a great London landlord should have parted with so great an inheritance.'[124]

The message was plain: 'the tendency to the breakup of large estates, which is now so familiar in the agricultural districts, is showing an increased inclination to become common in towns also.' As usual, the war slowed business down, although in 1915 the trustees of Lord Arundell of Wardour sold his Shaftesbury Avenue estate, which yielded £9,000 a year, for £250,000.[125] But thereafter, the great ground landlords of London rushed into the market. The 20-acre Berkeley estate, including both the square and its nightingale, went to a property company for £2 million. The Duke of Bedford sold part of Bloomsbury for a similar figure; Lord Portman disposed of 7 acres of St Marylebone for £95,000; Lord Southampton realized £200,000 from sales in Euston; and Lord Camden obtained

nearly £150,000 for ground rents in St Pancras and Camden Town.[126] Two further sales in the late twenties were even more remarkable: Lord Howard de Walden, who had inherited the Duke of Portland's London lands, sold 40 acres, including Great Portland Street, to Sir John Ellerman; and even the tight-fisted Westminsters off-loaded their Millbank estate for £900,000.[127]

In the provinces, the trend of patrician dispersal was very similar. In 1885, the much-indebted Haldon family began to sell their building estate in Torquay; in 1907, the Earl of Limerick disposed of his Limerick ground rents worth £6,000 a year for £113,000; in 1910 the Butes began to sell industrial land in the South Wales valleys; and during the war, Lord Tredegar sold ground rents in Monmouth and the Talbot estate and liquidated their holdings in Margham. After the war, the market surged forward again, and those who sold included the Calthorpe family at Edgbaston, the Butes at Aberdare, Lord Radnor at Folkestone, the Duke of Norfolk at Sheffield, and the Meyricks, Portmans, Levens, and Malmesburys at Bournemouth.[128] But the most remarkable sale was that of the Ramsden estate in Huddersfield, which included almost all of the land in the town. In 1894, the corporation had begun negotiations, with a view to purchasing; but they came to nothing. Now, in the changed post-war climate, the Ramsdens sold their lands to the town for £1.3 million. Like the Bedfords and Covent Garden, the reversal in attitudes and policy was sudden, definite – and irrevocable.[129]

As with works of art, the sales of provincial building estates continued throughout the inter-war years, and included some of the most renowned and valuable in the country. In 1925, Lord Derby sold land in Manchester, Salford, and Bury; in 1927 he disposed of his holdings in Bootle for £1.75 million; and in 1928 he realized some of his Liverpool ground rents for a similar sum. Between 1926 and 1944, the Earls of Dudley sold in Dudley itself, Sedgley, Tipton, and Brierley Hill.[130] In the late 1920s, the Scarisbrick family began to liquidate their share of the Southport building estate, and Charles Bibby Hesketh, the other main freeholder, sold 5,000 acres of undeveloped land, and 2,500 properties for £380,000. Other noteworthy sales included the Duke of Norfolk at Littlehampton, and the Duke of Newcastle, who disposed of the Park estate in Nottingham. But the greatest sale of all, which surpassed even the Ramsdens in Huddersfield, was made by the Marquess of Bute in 1938, when he liquidated the family holdings in Cardiff – amounting to two-thirds of the town, and containing 20,000 houses, 1,000 shops, and 250 pubs – for between four and five million pounds.[131]

From the dispersal of London and provincial building estates to the disposal of companies that had been set up by landowners to exploit

their non-agricultural resources, was a natural progression. Here, again, there was a relatively rapid reversal of policy, well illustrated in the case of the Dukes of Devonshire.[132] During the lifetime of the seventh duke, the family undertook extensive investment in undertakings connected with Buxton, Eastbourne, and Barrow-in-Furness, as well as with their Irish estates. But between 1891 and 1936, under the eighth and ninth dukes, this expansive policy was abruptly reversed. The shares in the Waterford, Lismore, and Dungavron Railway were sold; the family holdings in the Buxton Baths Company were disposed of; at Eastbourne they withdrew from the pier company and vainly tried to persuade the corporation to take over the Parks and Baths Company; and at Barrow they liquidated their holdings in the Steel, Steamship, and Naval Construction Companies. The old policy of estate exploitation by family-financed companies was brought to an end. In future, they had to fend for themselves, while the Devonshires sought alternative, less vulnerable, and more profitable outlets for their investments.

Among the super-rich, the Devonshires were unusual in the diversity of their non-agricultural involvements, and in the suddenness with which they withdrew from them. But other families were behaving in essentially the same way. In 1886, the Earl of Eglinton sold Adrossan Harbour, and in 1924 closed down the family iron works. In 1888, Lord Lonsdale leased his Whitehaven coal-mines, and in 1896 the Earls of Durham sold off their collieries. In 1898, the Duke of Norfolk conveyed his Sheffield markets to the corporation for £530,000, and in 1922, the Marquess of Bute sold Cardiff docks to the Great Western Railway. More gradually, but with the same end in view, the Earls of Dudley withdrew from their direct involvement in Black Country mining and smelting.[133] But for Lord Crawford, no such dignified withdrawal was possible from the Wigan Coal and Iron Company. In the late 1920s, the company suffered big losses and paid no dividends, and in 1930–1, at the behest of the banks, it was taken over by the Lancashire Steel Corporation, and Crawford ceased to be chairman.[134]

By the late 1930s, therefore, the patricians' direct links with the industrial economy were very much reduced. And in 1938, their connection was further eroded by the nationalization of mineral royalties. The actual acquisition did not take place until 1942, but the earlier legislation vested the ownership of the royalties in the Coal Commissioners, and provided £66 million in compensation. Although the owners had unsuccessfully asked for £150 million, and although (like Irish land) this was a further example of the ill-disposed stance of an ostensibly Conservative government, the depressed state of the coal industry, and the weakened resolve of the

landowners, may well explain why the measure was passed with little opposition.[135] And in any case, in individual terms, the compensation was not ungenerous. Among the foremost Scottish owners, the Earl of Wemyss received £500,000, the Duke of Hamilton £380,000, and the Duke of Buccleuch £125,000. Among great owners in the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire coalfield, the Duke of Devonshire pocketed £404,939, and the Duke of Portland £1,976,775. And a multinational mogul like the Marquess of Bute received £187,000 for his Scottish minerals, and £1,222,425 for Glamorganshire.[136]

The very extensive withdrawal by so many patricians from these ancillary forms of non-agricultural estate exploitation received much less contemporary attention than the simultaneous 'revolution in landowning'. But it was an essential aspect of the same phenomenon, and it was in its way just as revolutionary. Once again, the traditions and assumptions of the past centuries were put into definite reverse, and once again, the motives were fear for the future of real property, and a belief that a bigger and safer return could be obtained by making investments elsewhere. The ownership of broad acres might have been the most important defining characteristic of the British territorial classes. But the whole additional paraphernalia of country houses, London palaces, art collections, and non-agricultural enterprises collectively counted for at least as much. And here, too, from the 1880s, the landowners were emphatically and conspicuously in retreat.

iv. The Diversity of Experience

The sale of broad acres and of non-agricultural assets by the grandees and gentry between the 1880s and the 1930s must rank as one of the most profound economic and psychological changes of the period. And for the landowners (or former landowners) themselves, it was an experience at once transforming and traumatic. The evidence is invariably impressionistic, but the message it conveys and the mood it expresses are both clear and unequivocal: from confidence to anxiety, buoyancy to pessimism, expansiveness to retrenchment, and acquisitiveness to dispersal. As generalizations, these antitheses may stand. But they need to be illustrated and qualified. For if these were the general patterns, how did they differingly affect the small landowners, the middling proprietors, and the super-rich? And there is also another side to this: having obtained so much money by selling so many things, what did the patricians actually do with the proceeds?

For the squirearchy and minor gentry – those with incomes be-

tween £1,000 and £10,000 a year – the chances of survival were by definition the least good. The pressure of debt was often at its greatest, the impact of depression and taxation was most marked, the alternative sources of non-agricultural income were least abundantly available, the room for financial manœuvre was accordingly the least generous, and decline and fall was in consequence the most poignant and the most complete.[137] How could mortgages be discharged or death duties be met by owners of estates so small that there were no outlying parts that could effectively and conveniently be lopped off for sale? Either the whole property must go under the hammer, or none. This is well illustrated in the case of the Bower family of Welham in Yorkshire, who in the 1870s possessed 2,000 acres valued at £4,000 a year. By 1891, income had plummeted to £2,400 a year, while taxation and interest payments amounted to £2,800. As a result, the land, the house, and the pictures were sold, and this impoverished patrician family completely disappeared.[138]

So, even before the Lloyd George budgets and the First World War, the position of many squires was greatly depressed. And these later developments, combined with the renewed depression in agriculture, drove many more small landowners to the wall during the inter-war years.[139] They were not off-loading surplus acres or outlying estates immediately before 1914 or after 1918: they were selling the entirety of their holdings, at almost any time, and in most cases simply because they were compelled to. In 1928, for instance, two such properties came into the market: the 3,175-acre Dering estate near Ashford in Kent, which had been held by the family in the male line since the reign of Henry VI; and the 950-acre Sandford estate near Whitchurch, which was for sale after an ownership of 850 years. Six years later, the Pusey estate came on the market: 1,400 acres near Farringdon in Berkshire worth £1,090 a year, which had been in the same family for nine centuries. And in 1939, the Burgoyne estate of Sutton Park at Sandy near Bedford was put up for sale: after holding the lands since the seventeenth century, the line had died out.[140]

In Wales, where the squirearchy was more widespread, there were constant examples of crippling debt and reduced income squeezing so hard that territorial abdication was almost the inevitable result.[141] The Royal Commission on Land in Wales and Monmouthshire summarized the squires' problem well when it observed, in its final report: 'we have reason to believe that the pressure of encumbrances is more severely felt by the owners of smaller rather than of larger estates.'[142] One such unfortunate was Sir Marteine Lloyd of Bronwydd, who possessed 8,000 acres worth £6,600 in 1883. His lands were bearing mortgages of £94,000, and only by extensive sales could such severe debts be reduced to £24,000 by 1922. Lloyd

himself died in 1933, his wife four years later, and then the remnants of house and estate were sold off. The Powell family of Nanteos went exactly the same way. In the 1880s, their lands in Cardigan, Brecon, and Montgomery amounted to 33,674 acres worth only £9,597 a year. In the 1890s and 1920s, sales under pressure of debts reduced the acreage to 4,300 and the net income to a mere £2,000 a year. But this, again, was an inadequate basis for survival: by 1930 the rest of the estate had been sold and the line was extinct.[143]

In Ireland, where the generally depressed circumstances of small British landowners were accentuated by rent strikes, even greater debts, and the drastic and downward rental revisions of the Land Commissioners, the plight of the gentry was much worse. One Kerry landlord drew a rental income of £1,200 a year, of which £1,050 went in head rents, tithes, jointures, taxes, management, and interest, leaving him with a mere £150 on which to live. The Land Commission thereupon reduced his rents by one-third! In County Carlow, Captain Newton's estate yielded £1,668 gross, of which outgoings (including interest payments of £800) absorbed £1,374. His rents were reduced by 30 per cent.[144] For such owners, the only hope was somehow to hold on until better times, and then to sell out under the Land Purchase Acts on the best terms available. With luck, it might just be possible for them to clear their debts, and to have a small sum left over.

Not surprisingly, the themes of the 'passing of the squires' and the 'ruin of the country gentry' were extensively treated in much contemporary fiction. The 'Irish RM' novels of Somerville and Ross well capture the circumstances of gentry landlords poignantly poised between survival and oblivion. In the Forsyte Saga, the declining fortunes of the Mont family are rescued by the marriage of Michael – the son and heir – to Fleur Forsyte, whose father, Soames, is a quintessential member of the Victorian middle classes. In Flora Major's story, *The Squire's Daughter*, she describes the decline and fall of the De Lacey family, as the heirlooms and mansion are sold, as the estate is broken up, and as the frail and shabby survivors end their days in exile abroad. Likewise, Francis Brett Young peopled his best-selling novels, set in the West Midlands, with a cast of declining gentry: families like the Abberleys, Pomfrets, Ombersleys, and d'Abitots, with their heavy mortgages, small estates, and burdensome death duties, almost all inexorably heading to extinction. Considering that the 1937 edition of *Burke's Landed Gentry* listed one-third of the families as completely landless (with many more only hanging on by the skin of their teeth), the accuracy of these portraits was hardly in doubt.

For these small landowners, their estates had ceased to be econo-

mically viable. But others, with lighter debts, smaller outgoings, less depressed farms, or alternative sources of income, were able to carry on. By the late nineteenth century, families like the Bests of Boxley and the Brooks of Flintwick were drawing perhaps one-fifth of their income from overseas investments. Alternatively, a squire like Reginald Bray, whose family had owned an estate at Shere in Surrey since the fifteenth century, augmented his limited landed income by working as a London lawyer, while his wife wrote children's stories.[145] Indeed, as the Earl of Airlie pointed out in 1879, it was possible – at least arithmetically – for a very small estate's finances to be improved by judicious selling and investment. He gave an example of a property yielding £3,000 a year, from which £400 went on expenses and £600 on interest, and whose net rents were reduced in the depression from £2,000 to £1,400 a year. If half the estate was sold for £36,000, if £15,000 of that was earmarked for the repayment of the debts, and if the remaining £21,000 was invested at 4 per cent, the resulting income of rents and dividends combined would actually be increased.[146]

Among landowners with greater but still relatively moderate means – with incomes ranging from £10,000 to £30,000 a year – the picture was fundamentally the same. Some did not survive, while others carried on, but only in very changed and often reduced circumstances. In Ireland, the picture was predictably gloomy. Lord Belmore owned a 5,000-acre estate in Fermanagh, with a gross rent of £3,500, of which he received only one-fifth net. When the Land Commissioners compulsorily reduced his rents by 25 per cent, his surplus vanished and he was left unable to meet even his fixed outgoings. On a larger scale, Lord Dufferin, having spent £100,000 on estate improvements, found himself with an income of £21,180 in the late 1870s, of which £13,700 went on interest, and £4,115 on jointures and annuities. As a result, he sold off £370,042 worth of land between 1874 and 1880, paid off his debts, and invested the remainder, £54,580, in Canadian bonds.[147] Dufferin was very early off the mark; but by the 1900s, most Irish landowners were selling out, receiving their bonds and their bonus, paying off their debts, and investing the surplus – if there was any left. Indeed, it was men such as these – like Lords Bessborough and Fermoy – who were among the most active buyers of small country houses in England during the inter-war years.[148]

In Wales, the response was more varied. Some families sold early, others late; some sold out completely, others only partially. The Lisburnes were very early in the market, disposing of £68,000 worth of land in Cardiganshire between 1876 and 1899. George Cornwallis-West inherited a heavily encumbered estate at Ruthin Castle, and

sold the lot in 1922.[149] The decline and fall of the Pryses was more protracted. In 1876, they owned 32,000 acres, mainly in Cardiganshire, which produced £14,500 a year. From 1875 to 1895, they sold off some 10,000 acres for £186,000 to pay debts and portions, compelled to do so by the fact that interest payments were £13,500, giving them no effective margin on which to live. By 1896, they had met most of these liabilities, still had half of their estate intact, and had been able to invest some £26,800 in equities. But another round of portions, combined with death duties, meant that new encumbrances totalling £75,000 were accumulated by 1921, which inexorably led to a new series of sales. By 1934, a further £110,000 worth of lands had been sold, and by the time the Second World War broke out, the family was virtually landless and on the verge of complete extinction.[150]

In England, there were similar stories of disappearance, although other patricians survived more easily. Some who were only just within this category suffered the fate of the smaller squires, such as the Hart-Dyke family, who had held Lullingstone Castle in Kent for 500 years. In 1933, the trustees put the castle and 5,000 acres up for sale because of the pressure of heavy death duties. Miss Irene Lawley fared little better. In 1912, on the death of her father Lord Wenlock, she inherited (there being no son) the Escrick Park estate in Yorkshire. Death duties amounted to £60,000, of which she raised £20,000 at once by sales, paying the rest at the rate of £5,000 a year for eight years. But since her net income was only £4,000 a year, she had no choice but to let the house, and ultimately to sanction its conversion to flats.[151] Others were forced to similar if slightly less severe expedients. 'Oh!' wailed the third Lord Hatherton in 1891, 'what a dreadful thing it is to inherit a debt.' How right he was: on 15,000 acres producing £23,000 gross, his disposable income, once interest was paid, was a mere £1,000. Spending was curtailed, participation in politics abandoned, and land purchase terminated. Nearby at Keele Hall, Ralph Sneyd also found his burden of debt harder to bear than in more prosperous times, and let his house to a Russian grand duke.[152]

But for those so minded and so able, the easiest way to re-structure their finances was to follow Lord Airlie's advice, to sell part of their lands, to pay off their debts and encumbrances, and to reinvest the remainder in equities. Ironically, the trail blazer in this was the archetypal country gentleman, Walter Long, whose family estates in 1883 had amounted to 15,000 acres worth £23,000, mostly situated in Wiltshire. His decision to sell part of his holdings in 1910 was almost as momentous as the Duke of Bedford's sale of his Thorney estate. As he explained to Jesse Collings, 'I am selling a portion of my own

estate now simply and solely because I feel that it is impossible for poor men like myself to keep up large estates in the face of the present burdens.'[153] Precisely what this meant was made clear in a subsequent exchange of letters in *The Times*. An estate of 10,000 acres produced £10,000 gross, from which was deducted £5,000 for maintenance and mortgages, leaving only £5,000 net for keeping up position. If half the estate was sold at twenty-seven years' purchase, that would realize £135,000, of which £62,000 could be put to paying off debts and charges, and the remaining £73,000 could be invested at 4 per cent. The result was an investment income of £2,900 a year, plus a net rental of £3,750 (being £5,000 gross minus £1,250 for expenses), totalling £6,650, or £1,650 more than before.[154]

As this correspondence makes plain, some middling landowners were able to increase their gross income, and to reduce their outgoings, even in such unpropitious times. They would be lesser men as landowners, and might find that the majority of their income was now coming from the stock exchange; but that was the price of survival. The Grahams of Netherby illustrate this well. They owned 26,000 acres in Cumberland, which were carrying debts of £275,000. Between 1882 and 1905, the gross rent fell by more than 25 per cent, from £26,718 to £20,000. In the years immediately before 1914, half the estate was sold, the debt was reduced by 40 per cent, and the remainder was invested in shares. The result was that the Grahams' net income actually rose from £14,000 to £16,000. The same strategy was adopted by the Stanhopes, who held their major estates in Kent. Under the sixth and seventh earls, they sold off their peripheral properties in Buckinghamshire, Devonshire, Derbyshire, and Ireland, paid off portions and mortgages, and consolidated their estates around Chevening itself.[155]

But whether the outcome was successful survival or decline and decay, the extent of the transformation, among the middling rich as among the small landowners, cannot be doubted. Evelyn Waugh caught it well in *Brideshead Revisited* with the Marchmain family, who were closely modelled on the Earls Beauchamp of Madresfield, who owned 17,000 acres, mainly in Worcestershire, which were worth £25,000 in 1883. In the early 1920s, the Marchmains maintained both Brideshead itself, and Marchmain House, their London palace. They still lived in great state; they kept their own pack of hounds; and they had not raised their rents since the war. But they were also overdrawn at the bank by £100,000, and they had other debts elsewhere, which compelled Lord Marchmain to take action. Eventually, the town house was sold and demolished, and the family finances were restored. 'Selling Marchers', Cordelia remarks of her father, 'has put him straight again, and saved I don't know how much a year in rates. But it seems such a shame to pull it down.'[156]

Even among the super-rich, the responses were more varied than might at first sight be expected. Again, there were some with very heavy debts, or with estates disadvantageously located, or with no non-agricultural assets. The Dukes of Manchester suffered in all these ways: very large accumulated encumbrances, no mines or urban estates or equities, and in total only 27,000 acres, yielding £40,000, equally divided between Ireland (the 'troubles') and Huntingdon (very depressed arable). The Irish estates disappeared under the Land Purchase Acts, and most of the Huntingdon property went in 1920, leaving the ninth duke with almost no income. The Duke of Leeds fared little better. He, too, was rich, but not broad-acred for a duke: 24,000 acres, mostly in Yorkshire, yielding £33,000. In 1920, he sold most of his outlying estates, in Cornwall and Buckinghamshire, and by 1930 had sold most of his land in Yorkshire, as well as Hornby Castle and its contents. Much richer, but again in sorry straits, were the Marquesses of Anglesey, who held lucrative mineral lands in Staffordshire and Derbyshire. They had accumulated vast debts by the close of the nineteenth century, which necessitated the sale of Beaudesert. For such families as these, with liabilities and assets so finely balanced, there was not much to emerge when the day of reckoning came.

Even patricians who might be expected to be more resilient sometimes found the going very difficult. The Earls of Crawford and Balcarres boasted an income of £39,252 in 1883, of which three-quarters was derived from a mere 1,931 precious coal-bearing acres near Wigan. With this income, they had amassed their fine art collection and an incomparable library, and had freed themselves entirely from the vicissitudes of agricultural rental. But in 1913 the twenty-sixth earl died, and his successor was faced with death duties, debts, and family portions of between £500,000 and £600,000. 'The financial situation', he concluded, 'gives me cause for anxiety . . . I can never look forward to becoming a collector, but I must strive to free the estates from debt, and to preserve the pictures and the books.' He at once instituted strict economy measures: the London house was let, the staff was much reduced, and he was forced to sell parts of the library.[157] The crisis was duly weathered, but in the late 1920s, the troubles in the coal industry meant that the mineral income was wiped out. Thereafter, Crawford could survive only by going into business or by living off his capital. In order to continue his varied public career, he chose the latter alternative. But the price was high: 'the dispersion at derisory prices of the treasures we have accumulated with so much pride.'[158]

But others among the rich, and especially among the super-rich,

were much better placed, since they had far more room in which to conduct their financial manœuvres. Some, like the Bedfords and the Westminsters, were free from encumbrances altogether. And even those who were indebted usually found that the weight pressed much less heavily than on those who were poorer. Almost all of them enjoyed massive incomes that were uninfluenced by the vicissitudes of agriculture. At the time of the First World War, the Butes, the Northumberlands, and the Hamiltons were drawing £100,000 and more in mineral royalties; the income of the Dukes of Bedford and of Westminster from their London ground rents was considerably more than this; and men like Earl Fitzwilliam and Lord Derby were enjoying gross incomes of at least £250,000 a year.[159] Moreover, their assets and holdings were so diverse and varied that they could sell off a great deal, and still be very substantial figures. Many held estates in half a dozen counties, and could bear losing ten thousand acres with relative equanimity; some possessed so many country houses that the sale of one or two would be more a relief than a deprivation; and some owned such splendid collections of art that they would hardly notice the sale of a Rembrandt or two. Above all, they possessed assets that were more easily realizable at a good price than mere agricultural land.

Of course, they protested loudly, especially over death duties. There is a famous cartoon in *Punch* of 1894 that shows a disconsolate Duke of Devonshire saying to a worried Duke of Westminster, 'We may consider ourselves lucky if we can keep a tomb over our heads' (see p. 96). But as Loulou Harcourt pointed out, the Duke was merely 'posing as a pauper'.[160] For it quickly became clear that death duties could be avoided. All that was required, as one pundit early on remarked, was to devise a method 'by which property shall never pass on a death, but only upon some other event, to render the property altogether free from death duties.'[161] One option was for the owner to make the estates over to his successor in good time: in 1914, Lord Lansdowne dealt with his Scottish holdings in this way; and the Duke of Atholl, having held his lands for fifty years, handed over half his acres to his son. The alternative solution, which was even more widely adopted, was to set up a private estate company, which greatly reduced the value of dutiable property, while allowing the landowner to preserve full control. In the inter-war years, a variety of great grandees, like Buccleuch, Bute, Fitzwilliam, Rutland, Beaufort, Devonshire, and Salisbury set up such companies, and many small landowers followed suit.[162]

Even so, these great moguls could not and did not go on as before. Like the lesser rich among their friends, they were extremely worried by Lloyd George, who attacked the dukes with especial fervour:

if property was unsafe and threatened, then those who owned the most of it had the most to fear and the most to lose. In the same way, with agriculture so depressed, and with land no longer as important or as prized as an asset as it had once been, there was no point in holding on to tens of thousands of acres when there were alternative and more profitable assets to be held. And, at a time when the cost of living had gone up greatly, it made much less sense than before to spend on the upkeep of so many houses in town and country. There was thus, among the super-rich, a very strong incentive to restructure their assets in a more rational way. And, by sheer demographic chance, many of them had an unusually long period in which to do this, as a group of great grandees held their titles and estates for an unusually extended span of time, such as the sixth Duke of Portland (1879–1943), the eleventh Duke of Bedford (1893–1940), the second Duke of Westminster (1899–1953), the fourth Marquess of Bute (1900–47), the seventh Earl Fitzwilliam (1902–43), the seventeenth Earl of Derby (1909–48), the ninth Duke of Devonshire (1908–38), the fifth Duke of Sutherland (1913–63), and the sixteenth Duke of Norfolk (1917–75).

As the *Estates Gazette* had remarked in 1894, 'that family will flourish most which is most given to longevity'.[163] But how, exactly, did they restructure their financial affairs? In the first place, they sold a great deal: for them above all, the change from landed accumulation to landed disbursement was the most noteworthy. The Duke of Sutherland sold his Trentham and Lilleshall estates, his London town house, and half his massive highland empire. The Dukes of Westminster sold Cliveden, Grosvenor House, much of their unrivalled collection of paintings, and a large part of their Eaton estate. The Duke of Devonshire sold two great London houses, most of his Irish lands, some works of art from Chatsworth, and most of his holdings in most of his Buxton, Barrow, and Eastbourne companies. The Duke of Bedford sold the entire Thorney estate, the Covent Garden market, and parts of Bloomsbury. The Duke of Norfolk sold his Sheffield markets, parts of his building estate in the town, some agricultural lands in the West Riding, part of Little-hampton, and Norfolk House in London. The Marquess of Bute sold his Glamorgan agricultural estates, his docks and building estate in Cardiff, and his mineral rights. And Lord Dudley sold works of art, his estates in Wales and Scotland, the Whitley Court property, and most of his mineral-bearing lands in the Black Country.

What did the super-rich do with the very large sums of money – often running into several millions of pounds – thus realized? If necessary, the first call was to pay off debts, portions, and death duties. And the surplus that remained was invested, usually in a wide

range of equities, in accordance with the changed practices that had been developing from the 1880s. From that decade onwards, most landowners with money to spare preferred to put it in equities rather than in land. As an investment, it was probably more secure; it was certainly more liquid; and, if it was overseas, it avoided British income tax or death duties. The Earls of Leicester had, until the 1870s, only invested, in the traditional mode, in local companies usually connected with their estates. But thereafter, there was a major change in their policy as, between 1876 and 1891, they invested £320,000 in railway shares, of which £175,000 went into British companies, while the remainder was dispersed overseas in India, Canada, Argentina, and the United States. In addition, they invested £30,000 in British banks and breweries, and a further £40,000 in Australian, Canadian, South African, and Argentinian bonds. And others did the same. In the 1880s, the Marquess of Salisbury's trustees invested heavily in railway shares, and in the 1890s, such super-rich grandees as Durham, Fitzwilliam, Sutherland, and Portland were putting their money into British and overseas stocks and bonds.[164]

With the imposition of death duties, and the new Lloyd George taxes, the temptation to pull out of land and out of Britain became even greater; and among the richest of all, it even became fashionable to buy lands as well as shares overseas. Before the First World War, the second Duke of Westminster bought property in the Orange River Colony, and afterwards extended his real-estate investments to Rhodesia, Canada, and Australia. The Duke of Sutherland bought land in Florida and Canada, while Earl Fitzwilliam acquired an estate in California as well as putting a further £250,000 in shares.[165] The Duke of Bedford, after his many sensational sales, invested the proceeds, not as popular legend has it, in Russian government bonds which became worthless in 1917, but in British War Bonds, and Indian and Canadian stock. As one of his agents had explained in 1912, 'it is the security of their capital which landlords are frightened about. They prefer the security they get in Canada to the security they get in the British Isles.'[166] Indeed they did, and the trend among the very rich was so marked that Lord Esher not only explained it to George V, but suggested the King might follow suit:

> It has, perhaps, come to Your Majesty's notice that, of late years, some of the greatest landowners among Your Majesty's subjects have been acquiring large estates in the dominions overseas. No one who has watched the course of recent legislation in this country, both fiscal and social, can fail to understand and to see the wisdom of those who have capital to invest, taking advantage of the fields still open in western Canada and certain parts of Africa.[167]

Two examples from among the very rich illustrate these developments in more detail. In the early 1880s, the income of the Duke of Devonshire was entirely derived from agricultural rentals, and from dividends in companies associated with his estates. There was also a debt of £2 million, the interest payments on which were taking some 60 per cent of his disposable income. Between 1891 and 1932, the eighth and ninth dukes mobilized £2.75 million by sales of land, of company shares, and of Devonshire House. They paid off most of the debt, and invested the remaining sum in equities, much of it in Canada. So, by the late 1920s, the ninth duke was enjoying a larger disposable income than his grandfather, the majority of which now came from stock-exchange dividends.[168] The same fundamental change took place in the finances of the Earls of Bridgewater. In the 1880s, the family estates consisted of 13,000 acres, yielding £71,000 a year, largely thanks to the family canal. On the death of the third earl, £480,000 was paid in death duties by mortgaging Bridgewater House, by selling the Bridgewater Library to Huntingdon in 1917, and by disposing of land between 1918 and 1922. By that time, it was calculated that the agricultural estates were yielding a return of only 2 per cent, so that the fourth earl sold all the remaining estates, except Bridgewater House itself, and invested the £3.3 million he obtained in equities.[169]

For the very richest landowners, transactions such as these were rarely impelled by immediate impoverishment, nor even by the pressure of death duties: they were, more often, rational decisions to restructure their assets more securely and more profitably, in the light of the prevailing and predicted political and economic conditions. So, despite Harcourt and Lloyd George, they survived. But only by changing. Compared with their forebears, they were emaciated grandees: with fewer houses, fewer works of art, less broad-acred, and no longer much involved in non-agricultural estate enterprises. And this was reflected in the marked change in their income structure. Before the 1880s, it was territorially generated: from agricultural or ground rents, from mineral royalties, or from dividends paid by companies on their estates. But by the 1920s, families like the Butes, the Devonshires, and the Ellesmeres were drawing the majority of their income from shareholdings in companies with which they had no such territorial link. Increasingly, the super-rich were becoming *rentiers*, while masquerading as grandees. Their style of life might have remained landed in its mode of expenditure; but it was increasingly plutocratic in terms of its source

of income. And, while such men had once dominated the land, they certainly did not dominate the stock exchange.

v. Conclusion: A Balance Sheet

In strictly economic terms, there can be no doubt that the British patricians were a failing and fragmenting class in the years from the late 1870s to the late 1930s. Their position as an unchallenged wealth élite was undermined, their unifying sense of territorial identity was dissolved, and their financial circumstances became increasingly divergent. The most significant characteristic that landowners had in common in this period was that most of them were getting out of land. But it might be voluntary or because there was no choice, it might be done with relish or with regret, and it might be only in part or completely. And what happened thereafter was even more varied: some did not survive at all, while others remained quite prosperous; some just hung on, while others were better off than before; some remained primarily landowners, while others became predominantly *rentiers*; and some remained essentially British-based, while others became more international in their concerns. Even among the poorest landowners, there were some who survived; and even among the richest, there were some who succumbed. But on the whole, those who had been the most prosperous and the most landed before the 1880s remained so thereafter.

By the 1930s, it seems clear that the latter-day Duke of Omnium had less in common with the descendants of the small squire than his forebears had had a century before. But these were not the only variations. In different parts of Britain, the patricians disappeared with varying degrees of completeness. In Ireland, the demise of the landed establishment was almost total: the estates vanished, most of the houses were either destroyed or deserted, and many patricians fled the country. In Wales, too, there were only a few flourishing landowners left: some grandees buttressed by stock-exchange earnings; some tenacious squires, isolated and impoverished. By contrast, the patricians survived rather better in England and in Scotland. North of the border, this was partly because there was by then less tenant hostility than in Wales and Ireland; partly because many holdings were so massive that even after selling two or three hundred thousand acres, families like the Sutherlands remained substantial owners; and partly because some of the estates were bought up intact by those who enjoyed their sporting rights, rather than sold off piecemeal to the tenantry.

In England, the picture was different again. This was to some extent because most supra-national grandees were essentially English-based, so that as they sold off their peripheral lands on the Celtic fringe, they became less British but more English. The Devonshires and Fitzwilliams may have sold out in Ireland, but they remained important territorial powers in Derbyshire and Yorkshire. The Beauforts may have liquidated their Welsh holdings, but they retained massive estates in Gloucestershire. But even within England itself, there were variations. In counties like Worcestershire, where there were few great grandees, and where the gentry were emphatically in retreat, the turnover was relatively high; but in counties that boasted a large number of great estates heartlands, the change was much less dramatic. In West Sussex, the old order was much more stable, as the Norfolks, Richmonds, and Leconfields all survived as major territorial powers. But this was only because they were consolidating their holdings at Arundel, Goodwood, and Petworth, even as they sold extensively in Yorkshire, Scotland, and Ireland.

Whatever the qualifications and the variations, the *Estates Gazette* was not far wrong when it predicted in 1910, 'the ultimate consequence can only be that we shall find ourselves with a comparatively landless aristocracy.'[170] But while change was so great that it was the dominant feature of these years, there was also what sociologists call a lag, as inherited habits of patrician behaviour continued even when the circumstances that had given rise to them and justified them had disappeared. The ninth Duke of Devonshire was a much-diminished landowner compared with his grandfather, and obtained most of his income from the stock exchange rather than the land. But he kept up his great and grand progress from one stately home to another throughout the inter-war years, and the sumptuous life that he lived at Chatsworth, as evoked in the first volume of Harold Macmillan's memoirs, had more in common with that of his forebears than his descendants.[171] However ruthless and acute such patricians might be in disposing of family lands and heirlooms, and in moving into the new and alien world of international finance, they remained fundamentally landed in ethos and mentality.

So, even in retrenchment and in retreat, some landowners felt and behaved in a way that belied and even contradicted their own dramatically altered economic condition. In the mid-1880s, in the depths of the agricultural depression, Gladstone told his son that it was a 'high duty to labour for the conservation of estates, and the permanence of the families in possession of them', and even predicted that in one hundred years' time, the countryside would still be dominated by great territorial accumulations.[172] In the early 1920s, at the very moment when so much land was coming under the hammer, Lord Curzon could celebrate the fact that 'Son succeeds father for generation after generation; he retains or adds to, or diminishes

the patrimony of his ancestors; he builds or rebuilds or alters the family mansion; he takes part in the public life of his country.'[173] And as late as 1929, in the midst of renewed agricultural depression, Lord Montagu chose these words as his epitaph: 'He loved Beaulieu, deeming his possession of it a sacred trust to be handed on to his successors in a like manner.'[174]

Yet when all due allowance is made for such lingering patrician hopes and sentiments, for the continuity that undoubtedly coexisted with the change, it is the facts of economic decline, the adjustment in territorial circumstances, the dispersal of hereditary possessions, the disappearance of so many families, that stand out most strongly. Gladstone may have cherished landed estates, but as a politician he did much to erode landowners' confidence, and the broad acres at Hawarden did not long survive inviolate after his death. Lord Curzon may have adored Kedleston, but he could maintain it only by depending on that very form of plutocratic American wealth that he so rightly feared. And even Lord Montagu could sustain his sacred, landed trust only by earning money as a motoring journalist. These ardent and adaptable patricians might weather the 'silent revolution' in landownership, but only on changed and increasingly non-landed terms. And even if such men had survived seventy years of bleak and bewildering agricultural depression, it was not at all clear that they could also survive another five years of world war.

4

THE EROSION OF LOCAL CONTROL

> Landownership lost its perquisite of local political power in Britain, partly because of the democratisation of the national franchise in 1884–5 and of county administration in 1889, partly because administration became too complicated to be left to part-time and unqualified squires.
>
> (E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (1969), p. 203.)

> The new county councils created by the Local Government Act of 1888 showed more strikingly in Wales than in any other part of Britain the new transition to democracy. The landed gentry who had dominated the countryside for centuries as justices of the peace were routed in an immense social revolution.
>
> (K. O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales, 1880–1980* (1981), p. 52.)

> The necessity for Protestants to hang together in the face of Catholic and Nationalist pressures gave [the Ulster landowners] a larger political importance than any their southern brethren could aspire to . . . The gentry preserved a governing role there longer than in the rest of Ireland.
>
> (F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890–1939* (1979), pp. 118, 121.)

From the 1880s, the sustained and successful political assault on the British landowning class coincided with – and further accentuated – its economic decline and territorial decay. But in addition, these developments necessarily weakened its local position as the élite that for centuries had represented and ruled the counties of the British Isles by hereditary right and unchallenged tradition. The extension of the franchise led to a widespread rejection of old-style rural politics and representation, while the creation of the new county councils brought a more gradual, but no less real, change in the personnel and nature of local government. At the same time, the financial anxieties of many landowners meant that they were less inclined to shoulder these traditional responsibilities or to assume new ones, while the great breakup of their estates before and after the First World War only accentuated this withdrawal from county politics and local leadership. And if this was the sad and sobering experience of many grandees and gentry in England, Scotland, and (especially) Wales, then how much more so was it their fate in large parts of Ireland?

Throughout the counties of Great Britain, the passing of the Third

Reform Act fundamentally weakened the position of the old territorial classes, ushering in a new political world in which the traditional methods of control no longer sufficed, and where the notables and magnificœs were themselves decreasingly at home or at ease. Of course, the change did not happen quite this abruptly: in many industrialized counties, there had already been signs and portents in the years since 1832, while in other parts of the country, old structures of authority and patterns of behaviour lingered on into the inter-war years. But the overall trend was unmistakable and irreversible. A much larger and independent electorate, combined with patrician poverty and territorial decline, meant that fewer landowners were standing for Parliament and that even fewer were able to get themselves elected. By the First World War, the majority of county seats in England, Wales, and Scotland were no longer represented by the once traditional landed class, and that very pronounced trend was only further accentuated in the years after 1918.

In county government, the changes were of a similar kind and at a similar time. By the 1880s, some heavily industrialized shires were effectively governed by JPs of non-landed background, and the Liberal reforms of the 1890s and 1900s changed fundamentally the selection – and thus the composition – of the magistracy. The result was that in most counties, the notables soon lost for good their traditional dominance of the bench. But at the same time, the reform of local government, undertaken by a Tory cabinet, robbed the 'rural House of Lords' of most of its administrative functions, and finally brought democracy to the countryside. In Wales, the more radical regions of Scotland, and the more industrialized counties of England, this did indeed bring about a rural revolution. Even in those remote regions where the rule of the gentry and the magnates still persisted, the social composition of the county councils gradually but inexorably moved towards the middle classes. And as local government became more bureaucratic and more professionalized, the old style of amateur, traditional, patrician administration seemed increasingly inappropriate and anachronistic.

In Ireland, the position was, predictably, both more extreme and more complex. Throughout most of the country, the aristocracy had ceased to be the major governing or political presence before the greatest sales of land actually began. Even by the early 1880s, the new-style nationalist agitation had swept away most landowners as Irish MPs, and had also removed them from their dominant position on the local Poor Law Boards. The result was that the Conservative reform of Irish local government in 1898 merely completed this process of political overthrow: territorial abdication came in its aftermath, rather than brought it about. Only in Ulster was the

picture markedly different, since the gentry and grandees retained some of their local influence in the most Protestant counties, both in terms of government and representation. But even there, such power was preserved only on the sufferance of the big bourgeoisie of Belfast, who by now were emphatically in charge of the Province's affairs. In the aftermath of partition, the patricians hung on in the north as the minority partners among the governing élite, but in the newly independent south, they effectively disappeared altogether.

i. County Representation: From Deference to Democracy

In his nostalgic reminiscences, *Some Memories*, Lord Percy of Newcastle noted that 'in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the era of agricultural depression . . . , the great landowning families ceased to govern England.'[1] Despite its excessive simplicity and Anglocentrism, this statement is essentially correct. For the reaction against patrician control of county politics began even before the passing of the Third Reform Act, with the Liberal victory in the general election of 1880. Throughout Great Britain, landed families who had represented constituencies for decades, and who had controlled their politics for even longer, found themselves defeated in that contest: a Williams-Wynn in Montgomeryshire, Buccleuch nominees in Dumfries and Selkirk, and a son of the Earl of Ellesmere in Lancashire. The heirs of the Duke of Manchester, the Duke of Westminster, and the Marquess of Hertford failed to secure election, the latter in his local constituency of South Warwickshire.[2] As such, these results were not only a triumph for revived Gladstonian Liberalism: they were also the portent of patrician decline as the political arbiters and parliamentary representatives of the localities.

Accordingly, the tide of local feeling was already running strongly against the gentry and grandees when the passing of the Third Reform Act changed the structure of rural politics emphatically to their disadvantage. It gave a fair share of seats to metropolitan, urban, and industrial areas for the first time. It abolished many of those small boroughs where peers' sons and gentry had hitherto happily housed themselves: constituencies like Beaumaris and Pembroke in Wales, and Wenlock and Woodstock in England, which had been deliberately retained in 1867 to favour the landed interest. By merging these seats into the old county divisions, and by creating many new county constituencies that were highly urbanized or suburbanized, it markedly reduced the number of authentically rural seats for which patricians might hope to sit.[3] And it spectacularly extended the county franchise by giving the vote to the rural labourers: the Cheshire electorate grew from 20,800 to 100,000; in

Northamptonshire, it trebled; in Lincolnshire, the percentage of adult males with the vote increased from 34 to 85; and in Wales, the county vote went up from 75,000 to over 200,000.[4]

Despite the caveats that must be entered, these changes fundamentally transformed the nature and working of county elections. They removed rural politics from the direct and confident control of the landed interest, and made necessary a wholly new style of political management. The demise of the old two-member constituencies meant that the traditional pattern of gentry-arranged compromise between conservative and radical candidates was no longer possible. The massive extension of the electorate meant that old methods of control (and intimidation) would no longer work. The need to canvass more widely and to organize more thoroughly, combined with the intrusion of party agents from London, meant that politics became more professional. And the growth in the number of contested elections, the increased influx of non-landed and carpet-bagger candidates, and the greater stress on national issues eroded the local and intimate nature of county politics, which had been the essential precondition for patrician dominance.[5] In this sense, the reforms of 1884–5 were far more significant, and far more threatening, than the earlier measures of 1832 and 1867: for they emphatically spelt the end of the politics of Barset.

All this seemed confirmed in the general election of 1885, 'the great turning point', when the agricultural labourers – perhaps attracted by the radical Liberal slogans of 'three acres and a cow' – rejected their landed representatives in an ominous display of non-deferential voting. Throughout Great Britain, the aristocratic casualties were more numerous and even more spectacular than in the previous election. In England, Lord Henry Bentinck was beaten by Joseph Arch in Norfolk, a Lowther was defeated in Lincolnshire, and a Fitzwilliam in Yorkshire. In the lowlands of Scotland, Lord Haddo was turned out in Haddingtonshire, and in the Highlands, the crofter candidates vanquished their social superiors in Inverness, Argyll, Sutherland, and Caithness.[6] In Wales, the most symbolic defeat of all was that of Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn in Denbighshire, the county that his family had represented as of hereditary right for nearly two hundred years. And this humiliating rejection proved to be irrevocable: for although he stood again in 1886 and 1892, he failed to win the seat back, and thereafter, the family withdrew completely from parliamentary politics.[7]

But this dismal picture of landed rejection and patrician retreat must not be over-exaggerated. To begin with, the consequences of the Third Reform Act were not unrelievedly disastrous. By deliberately separating urban from rural communities in the shires, it

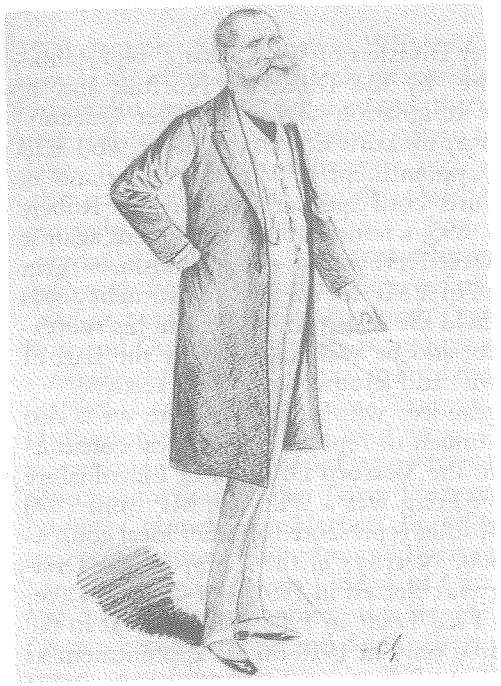
21. Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn, *Punch*, 28 Apr. 1883.

ensured that there were, in almost every county, at least some amenable constituencies where 'the "landed interest" was given a further lease of life.'[8] Moreover, the rural revolution that seemed to be threatening in 1885 did not in the end materialize: after their first flush of anti-landlord ardour, agricultural labourers became increasingly apathetic in attitude and reduced in numbers, while the Home Rule crisis tended to unite the rural communities around Conservative (and thus largely landed) leadership. Above all, it is important to remember that, whatever the difficulties and anxieties, the system of great estates endured in Great Britain largely unaltered until 1910. Provided they were still prepared to exert themselves as local political leaders, resident landowners remained potentially the most influential and significant element in the rural power structure.[9]

The result was that many patricians provided both the high command and the essential financial support of the new constituency organizations that sprang up in the shires in the aftermath of the Third Reform Act, especially on the Conservative and Unionist side. Great families like the Devonshires in Derbyshire, the Rutlands in Leicestershire, the Norfolks in Sussex, and the Bedfords in their titular county remained pre-eminent in terms of local leadership and local subscriptions. The Stratford Division of Warwickshire was dominated by the sixth Marquess of Hertford between 1885 and 1912, who personally appointed the committees of selection, and effectively chose the candidates himself.[10] In southern Scotland, the families of Stair and Buccleuch dominated the local associations in Galloway and Dumfries. And even in Wales, the leaders of forlorn Toryism were almost without exception the great landowners: Penrhyn in Caernarfon, Cawdor in Carmarthen, and Williams-Wynn in Denbigh. They might no longer seek parliamentary honours themselves: but they still controlled the constituency machinery. Only in counties like Cardigan, where there were no resident grandees, was Conservative organization virtually non-existent.[11]

Likewise among the Liberals, some loyal patricians continued to provide firm local leadership, which might still decisively influence the outcome of an election. In the same Warwickshire constituency where Lord Hertford dominated the Tory side, the fifth Marquess of Northampton controlled the Liberal Association. He provided the money, the initiative, and a Liberal imperialist tone: and in 1904 he personally selected the candidate who actually won the division in 1906.[12] In Mid Northamptonshire, the unusual survival and success of Liberalism in what should have become a staunchly Unionist constituency owed much to the presence of the Spencer family: the estate was the largest in the division; the fifth earl himself was a Liberal, a cabinet minister, Master of Foxhounds, and chairman of the quarter sessions and of the county council; and Althorp was the centre of one of the few well-funded and well-run Liberal constituency organizations in the county.[13] Even in Wales, resident Liberal landowners still counted for something. In Pembrokeshire, Lord Kensington was a significant figure, and in Cardigan, the entire association was effectively funded by a local squire, Matthew Vaughan Davies.[14]

But in addition to controlling these new constituency organizations, landowners could also resort to the more traditional means of influencing and intimidating voters. Predictably, the Conservatives claimed that there was no such activity, but the Liberals naturally took the opposite view. Beyond doubt, the 'secret' ballot was much less confidential than was claimed: because the counting of votes was



22. Lord Spencer by F. C.-Gould.

rather casual, it was still possible for candidates to find out how entire villages had voted. Some landlords still made it clear that they expected their tenants to vote for their candidate: as late as 1900 the Marquess of Hastings allegedly evicted one who disobeyed his instructions.[15] There were certainly instances of coercion when a landed family changed sides, as with the Wimbornes, who switched from Conservative to Liberal in 1904, and seem to have been very heavy-handed in the contests of 1906 and 1910. And in the 1910 elections, there was general recognition that the landowners had exerted themselves with more than usual vigour: Churchill's predictable denunciation of 'the feudal screw' was corroborated by Lord Salisbury's admission that in the agricultural constituencies, the leaders of opinion 'strove as they have never striven before to gain the support of the electors'.[16]

Since it was still possible for the patricians to influence both the selection of candidates and the decisions of some of the voters, it automatically followed that traditional landed figures could also get themselves elected for traditional landed constituencies. In Cheshire, the two safe rural seats were both represented by scions of county grandees: from 1885 to 1906, the Eddisbury Division returned the Hon. H. J. Tollemache, and the Hon. Alan Egerton sat for

Knutsford.[17] In the Chichester Division of West Sussex, representation was provided, as before, by the Dukes of Norfolk and of Richmond. In 1894, on the resignation of Lord Walter Gordon-Lennox, the seat was taken over by Lord Edmund Talbot, who held it uninterruptedly until his appointment as Viceroy of Ireland in 1921. In Mid Northamptonshire, Lord Spencer's half-brother Robert held the seat from 1880 until 1895, a remarkable achievement against the national trend. And in West Derbyshire, the Devonshires' grip was virtually unbreakable: the first MP for the new constituency was Mr Victor Cavendish, who held the seat from 1885 until his succession to the dukedom in 1908; and he was followed by the Earl of Kerry, son of Lord Lansdowne and another very close relative.

But it was not only the grandees who survived: there were also country gentlemen who continued to represent their local constituencies. Henry Chaplin sat for the Sleaford Division of Lincolnshire for over twenty years. Walter Long was a Wiltshire MP from 1880 until 1892, and his younger brother represented another local constituency between 1895 and 1900. Nearby, in the Chippenham Division, John Dickson Poynder was elected in 1892 as a Conservative, changed to the Liberals over Free Trade in 1905, held his seat in the subsequent election, and retired only in 1910 on his appointment as Governor-General of New Zealand.[18] But it was in Shropshire that this pattern of gentry dominance was especially marked. The Ludlow, Newport, and Oswestry Divisions were dominated by traditional 'Tory squires' like R. J. More, W. S. Kenyon-Slaney, G. R. C. Ormsby-Gore, and W. C. Bridgeman. They came from families whose forebears had regularly represented the county, they were themselves closely related, and their right to be returned to Westminster remained virtually unchallenged. In 1892 it was observed that 'we have one common cause at heart, and that is to return Shropshire men to parliament'; and, for the next twenty years, that is precisely what happened.[19]

In many rural constituencies of Scotland, the dissolution of old patrician antagonisms in the aftermath of Home Rule, and the gradual weakening of the crofter agitation, meant that resident landowners and great magnates were able to reassert themselves in the south, and even recapture some of their influence in the northern, crofter counties. Roxburghshire returned the Hon. A. R. D. Elliot (a Minto), the Hon. M. F. N. Napier (a Napier), the Earl of Dalkieth (a Buccleuch), and Sir John Jardine. In the same period, Ayrshire was represented by Elliots and Cochranes, and Wigtown by Sir Herbert Maxwell and Viscount Dalrymple, son of the Earl of Stair.[20] Even in Sutherland, a kinsman of the county's titular duke, F. S. Leveson-Gower, won as a Unionist in the favourable circumstances of the

1900 election. And as late as 1910, one jaundiced contemporary felt moved to offer this analysis of constituency politics north of the border: 'In many Scottish counties, there is a . . . feeling of exclusiveness still somehow maintained, quite unsuited to these democratic days . . . The landed proprietors and "county families" are a class apart, and above the middle class . . . and the working classes generally.'[21]

Even in Wales, the landowners lingered less limply than is often supposed. Sometimes they survived as Liberal Unionists in Anglicized or border counties. In South Glamorgan, the influence of the Bute and Dunraven families remained considerable, and this enabled a member of the latter family to hold the seat as a Unionist from 1895 to 1906. Colonel Cornwallis-West was returned as Liberal MP for Denbighshire in 1880, but held on as a Liberal Unionist until 1892. Sometimes, as in England, they remained loyal to Liberalism. In Monmouth South, the Tory Tredegars were superseded by the Liberal Colonel Ivor Herbert in 1906, who was himself a local squire.[22] Arthur Humphreys-Owen, who owned 4,000 acres in Montgomeryshire, was Liberal MP for the county from 1895 until 1905. And Cardiganshire was represented by Matthew Vaughan Davies between 1892 and 1921. He was an unlettered, uncultured squire, who was Master of the local foxhounds; he had contested the same constituency unsuccessfully as a Conservative in 1885; and he ran the local Liberal constituency organization virtually as an extension of his own estate.[23]

But while patrician involvement in rural politics and representation did not disappear overnight in the aftermath of the Third Reform Act, it is important to keep it in proportion. For what had been the norm in the shires until the 1870s increasingly became the exception thereafter. Only in a very few Welsh constituencies, in the lowlands and on the east coast of Scotland, and in the rural heartlands of England, did the politics of Barset continue unaltered and unchallenged. And even where the landowners presided over the new constituency associations, real power had often passed elsewhere. The local branches of the Primrose League might be decorated with ornamental aristocrats: but the day-to-day work of management and fund-raising was undertaken by the increasingly bureaucratic Tory Central office.[24] In most Welsh and Scottish counties, it was the middle-class professionals – the solicitors, the clergymen, and the schoolteachers – who were increasingly dominant in all local affairs. And in England, it was Lord Salisbury himself who sought to purge the constituency associations of the solicitors and lawyers who were the clients of the landowners, and to put full-time professional party workers in their place.[25]

The real difficulty, as Lord Percy later remarked, was the coincidence of agricultural depression with the Third Reform Act. At the very time when politics required more money, many patricians had less of it to spend. A contested county election might cost £5,000, and there were also constant donations and expenses. As Lord Francis Hervey, MP for Bury St Edmunds from 1885 to 1892, explained, there was 'a mission hall to be erected, church repaired, organ provided, important alterations to hospital', as well as the ordinary contributions to the football and cricket clubs and the friendly societies.[26] The Herveys were reasonably well off. But many landowners, forced to economize, could no longer afford this expense. In 1894, Lord Warwick's son and heir refused to stand for a local constituency because he could not afford to. And Thomas Gibson-Carmichael felt compelled to resign as MP for Midlothian after only five years as part of a widespread programme of retrenchment and economy: the London flat was given up, the big house sold, and some of his paintings were sent to auction. As Lord Balcarres noted 'the average man with moderate income' could no longer afford to pay for politics.[27]

But it was not only the expense of being an MP that weighed heavily on many landowners in these years of depression: it was also that representing these large, sprawling, rural seats required more work than ever before. Nursing a constituency for a long period, and contesting the elections themselves, now meant the candidate had to reach out to the enfranchised labourers in every village community. A few set-piece speeches in town halls would no longer suffice: 'it is the visit to the village feasts, the chat in the village schoolroom, the likeness over the chimney corner, and the pleasant family musical evenings in the winter, which are the articles of war.'[28] With few motor cars, and as yet no wireless, the period from 1885 to 1914 was arguably the worst in which to be a county MP. As Lord Willoughby de Broke recalled, 'the comfortable evenings at home had to give way, with distressing frequency, to the village meeting.' And for many, like Bertram Freeman-Mitford, this was simply too much. After only three years as a Warwickshire MP, he gave up. As he later recalled, 'I was perfectly determined not to stand again . . . Primrose League meetings, bazaars, political gatherings in schoolrooms, attended perhaps by a dozen yokels, two or three women and a little boy . . . made life impossible.'[29]

As some patricians rushed to retire, and others refused to stand, many county constituencies were obliged to turn to candidates who were not only non-gentry, but increasingly non-resident as well. Even in such a rural enclave as Lincolnshire, 'candidates appeared' in the aftermath of the Third Reform Act, 'that the old farming

electorate would have scorned as foreigners and carpet baggers.' In the West Country the same trend was so pronounced that as early as 1895, one newspaper vainly lamented that 'it is quite time that Cornwall ceased to import strangers as Parliamentary representatives.'[30] In Cheshire, 70 per cent of its MPs who sat between 1832 and 1885 had been born in the county, but the figure dropped to 25 per cent for those returned from 1885 to 1918. And when Freeman-Mitford gave up his Warwickshire constituency, he was replaced, not by a resident landowner, but by one Victor Milward, a Redditch needle-maker, who had lived in the division for only seven years, who had no family or business links with it, and who had been refused admission to the county bench in 1881 on the grounds that he was too parvenu.[31]

This sudden, unprecedented influx of middle-class outsiders into the county constituencies which had traditionally been the preserve of the local aristocracy and resident gentry was much commented upon at the time. Even in such sylvan and self-sufficient shires as Shropshire, the same trend was in evidence in the more urbanized constituencies. In 1906, the Wellington Division became vacant after A. H. Brown, a local country gentlemen, retired on completing thirty-eight years service. The Liberal candidate was C. S. Henry, who was not only an outsider, but an Australian, and the Conservative was Hildebrand Harmsworth, an outsider and a plutocrat. Henry won, and in 1910 actually held the seat, beating a much more traditional Tory candidate, who was the son and heir of the last MP for Wenlock borough, Captain the Hon. G. C. B. Weld-Forester.[32] And in Wales, it was the new middle class and petty bourgeoisie who were now firmly in command: the MPs for Anglesey, Glamorgan, and Carmarthen tended to be radical, nonconformist, and Welsh-speaking – journalists, solicitors, and clergymen.[33]

The 1906 general election wiped out another cohort of patricians almost as completely as the last great radical triumph of 1885 had done. In Glamorgan, the Talbots were vanquished after two hundred years of county politics. The sitting MP for Sutherland, a member of the Leveson-Gower family, went down to defeat, and after 1910 the family never sought parliamentary honours there again. In Cheshire, both Egerton and Tollemache were turned out, and they, too, withdrew from constituency politics for good.[34] The representation of Huntingdonshire had been virtually monopolized by the Sandwich and de Ramsay families, after the Third Reform Act as before. But both their MPs were defeated in 1906, at which point the family names disappear from the county's parliamentary history for ever. Even more significant was the demise of the Manners family in Leicestershire. From 1885, three members of the family had represented the

Melton constituency, without a break, and often without a contest. In 1906, the last Manners MP stood down, and the family never contested the division thereafter. And Sir John Hazlerigg, a local squire, who came forward as the new Conservative candidate, was himself defeated and never stood for Parliament again.[35]

This trend towards patrician abdication in county politics may be seen most vividly in the case of Warwickshire, where landed leadership and landed representation virtually collapsed in the years just before and during the First World War.[36] The Marquess of Hertford retired as President of the Stratford Division Conservative Association in 1909, and his son, a divorced bankrupt, declined to follow him. Likewise, on the Liberal side, the Marquess of Northamptonshire died in 1913, and his son was no more willing or able to take over. Here, in the Stratford Division, landed leadership disappeared abruptly, and was never restored. And, within five years, there was an even more significant departure in a neighbouring constituency. F. A. Newdegate came from an ancient family of Warwickshire gentry, his forebears had regularly represented the county, and he himself was MP for the Nuneaton Division from 1892 to 1906, and for Tamworth from 1909 to 1917. But in that year, he resigned and became Governor of Tasmania, and his family, too, bowed out of Warwickshire's parliamentary affairs. Within less than a decade, the patricians had all but disappeared.

The end of the First World War brought with it two more drastic changes. The Fourth Reform Act undermined landed influence still further, by extending the franchise, by making the constituencies much more uniform, and by sweeping away most of the remaining vestiges of the old system.[37] And the simultaneous 'revolution in landholding' only accentuated this trend towards local political abdication. For as many small landowners sold out altogether, and as the great grandees trimmed down their holdings or sold off their peripheral estates entirely, the territorial connection, which had been the basis of the old-style county politics, was gradually but inexorably broken. As Walter Long explained to Bonar Law in 1919, 'we owe our position in the country, and always have done, much more to local personal influence than to the popularity of our own political party.' But, he went on, 'the bulwark of so much that stood for social respect and civic good has been removed'. And the effect was very real: when the Duke of Rutland sold much of his Haddon estate in the great post-war boom, the Bakewell area subsequently moved markedly to the left.[38]

By this time, therefore, the few old-world survivals were very much an anachronism. Where the great estates remained intact, deferential attitudes persisted, along with allegations of intimidation.

In West Derbyshire, in the Chatsworth constituency, Liberal canvassers claimed that local residents in the estate villages were afraid to open their doors to them. When Lord Willoughby d'Eresby won a hard-fought by-election for Rutland and Stamford in 1933, it was clear that the lustre of his name and the influence of his family was of positive, and perhaps decisive, benefit.[39] The Conservative Associations in such constituencies as West Derbyshire, Peterborough, Melton, and Newark were still presided over by the Duke of Devonshire, the Marquess of Exeter, the Marquess of Granby, and Earl Manvers. And their financial support was indispensable. At the Rutland and Stamford Conservative Association, the combined donations of Lords Ancaster and Willoughby d'Eresby in the 1930s amounted to £300 a year, which was nearly half of the total annual income. And in West Derbyshire, the Duke of Devonshire and his son provided 54 per cent of the Association's revenue.[40]

Under these circumstances, some great landed families still provided MPs for traditional county constituencies. The Marquess of Hartington was returned for West Derbyshire from 1923 until he became Duke of Devonshire in 1935. In Lancashire, Lord Stanley was MP for the Fylde Division from 1922 until his death in 1938, and Lord Balniel sat for the Lonsdale Division from 1924 until his succession to the peerage in 1940. Nearby, Oliver Stanley represented Westmoreland from 1924 until 1945, while the heirs of Lords Selborne and Salisbury represented county constituencies in Hampshire and Dorset. A smattering of local country gentlemen were also still in evidence: Ruggles-Brise in Essex. Courthope in Sussex, Acland Troyte and Dyke Acland in the West Country. And in Shropshire, the Oswestry and Ludlow Divisions continued their loyalty to home-grown patricians. When W. C. Bridgeman retired with a peerage in 1929, he was followed by Major B. E. P. Leighton, a country gentleman whose father had also been a Shropshire MP. And Ludlow's representation was both local and landed: Stanier, then Lord Clive, then George Windsor-Clive.[41]

In some Scottish constituencies, families that remained influential before the First World War continued to be so after, as their extensive sales of land still left them with acres to spare and influence to wield. The most conspicuous example of this was the Buccleuch family in Roxburgh, where the Earl of Dalkeith was MP from 1923 until his accession to the dukedom in 1935, when he was followed by his younger brother, Lord William Scott, who held the seat until the 1950s. In Caithness, Sir Archibald Sinclair was not only Lord-Lieutenant, but was MP from 1922 until 1945, and was returned unopposed in 1923, 1924, and 1931.[42] In Western Perth and Kinross, the Duchess of Atholl held the seat virtually unchallenged from 1923,

until her disagreement with the government's policy towards the Spanish Civil War led to her defeat in 1938. Even into the 1930s, this tradition lingered, not yet quite extinct. The Marquess of Douglas held Eastern Renfrew from 1930 until he became Duke of Hamilton a decade later, and in 1931, the young Lord Dunglass, son of the Earl of Home, was returned for Lanarkshire. Thus began, in appropriately patrician style, the political career of the man who was to become the last authentically aristocratic Prime Minister of Britain thirty years later.

These few survivals from the pre-1885 world should not be ignored. But what was already an exception by the First World War had dwindled into a marginal minority by the 1930s: the examples given in the last two paragraphs are not exhaustive, but there are not many more. Some were still connected with traditional localities, but now sat only for a very short time: instead of representing a constituency for life, they were no more than stopgap candidates. Such were T. G. F. Paget for Leicestershire Bosworth, who sat in the Parliament of 1922–3 but not thereafter; the last member of the Long family, who represented the Westbury Division of Wiltshire, but only from 1927 to 1931; and the last Thynne in a Somerset seat from 1931 to 1935. Others sat for constituencies with which they had no territorial links. Lord Fermoy, an Irish peer who had relocated himself near Sandringham, represented the Kings Lynn Division of Norfolk. Viscount Elmley, son of the Earl Beauchamp, was returned for Norfolk East. And Earl Castle Stewart, another Irish peer and sometime schoolmaster at Rugby represented the Melton Division of Leicester.[44]

In Wales, by the inter-war years, the patricians were even more peripheral. Indeed, there are only two such MPs who immediately spring to mind, and both represented border constituencies in the most Anglicized part of the Principality: C. L. Forestier-Walker, who sat for Monmouthshire from 1918 to 1934, and the Hon. Ivor Guest, who was MP for Brecon and Radnor from 1935 until his accession to the Wimborne peerage four years later. But across most of Wales, the old territorial class was now quite irrelevant, as is shown by the electoral history of Cardiganshire. Throughout this period, the county was held by Liberals: a lawyer, a school teacher, and the son of a tenant farmer. The Tory cause was still led by the few surviving landowners, but was quite forlorn. In 1923, Sir Pryse Pryse considered intervening as an anti-waste Liberal, but was politely told not to bother; and Lord Lisburne (an Irish peerage) who stood as the Conservative against two Liberals, came bottom of the poll with only 25 per cent of the votes. He did not stand again.[45]

By the 1920s and 1930s, the patricians had effectively ceased to matter in the management and representation of most rural constituencies in England, Scotland, and Wales. In West Sussex, where once the Norfolks and Richmonds had ruled unchallenged, the new inter-war MP was a plutocratic carpet-bagger, Major John Courtauld. In the increasingly suburbanized county of Cheshire, the trend was overwhelmingly away from local landowners or entrepreneurs, towards outsiders, professionals, and trade-union leaders, men with no local links, or of limited standing in the community.[46] Even in some of the Shropshire constituencies, the tenacious tradition of local landowners was finally overturned: the inter-war MPs for the Wrekin Division included a London railwayman and a trade-union leader from the north of England, while those for the Shrewsbury Division included a Manchester architect of Russian-Jewish extraction. And in the rural central and eastern Midlands, the eclipse of the patricians was equally complete: the percentage of Conservative candidates with landed backgrounds declined from 46 in 1918 to 11.5 in 1929.[47]

Until the late 1870s, the British parliamentary system remained fundamentally rural, but with urban enclaves: the majority of the constituencies were either small boroughs or amenable counties, and the majority of their MPs came from the landowning élite. But by the 1930s, this had changed dramatically: rural constituencies were now a minority in the total representational structure, and even there the landowners were becoming increasingly marginal figures: at best, they were a dwindling band representing a declining part of Great Britain. The change may have been more protracted than the sudden territorial upheaval of 1910–22, but the overall result was the same: in political representation as in landownership, five hundred years of patrician history was reversed in fifty. County politics was no longer an essential outwork of country house life: it had been fully assimilated into the national organizations of the great political parties. Only in a few very rural constituencies, still dominated by a great heartland estate, or by a caucus of exceptionally tenacious gentry, did some vestiges of the world of Barset survive.

ii. County Government: From Oligarchy to Bureaucracy

Writing in 1882, Charles George Milnes Gaskell, a Yorkshire country gentleman worth £10,000 a year, offered these pessimistic remarks on the present and future prospects of landownership:

> The privileges connected with the tenure of land are fast disappearing, if they have not already done so. The ranks of the magistracy

> are recruited from all classes, and if any consideration attaches still to the landowner from his official position, a county government bill, making extensive changes, will impair if not destroy it.[48]

Considering that Milnes Gaskell sat as a Yorkshire county MP, enjoying a comfortable majority, and was later to be chairman of the West Riding County Council for more than ten years, it may seem that his own experience belied his analysis and confounded his predictions. Yet in essence he was correct in his belief – and in his fear – that the patricians were soon to be superseded as the governing élite of England, Wales, and Scotland, partly because their grip on the old system of local control was indeed weakening, and partly because a new and ultimately very different structure of county government was soon to come into being.

Nevertheless, in the early 1880s, the gentry and grandees, as JPs and Lord-Lieutenants, seemed as fully in control of the British countryside as ever. They dispensed justice at petty and quarter sessions, and remained collectively responsible for the administration of the county. And this 'rural House of Lords' was still overwhelmingly patrician in its composition. As late as 1887, some three-quarters of the county magistrates of England and Wales came from just this background. Indeed, many Lord-Lieutenants refused to nominate magistrates from any other class. In Buckinghamshire, the third Duke of Buckingham was careful to ensure that the majority of his nominees were of authentic landed background or connection.[49] In Shropshire, as late as 1905, there were 240 Tory JPs and only 10 Liberals, and this distribution was defended by the chairman of quarter sessions, Sir Offley Wakeman, on the grounds that small tradesmen would be inappropriate magistrates as they would be unable to deal impartially with people who might be their customers. And in Wales, the Anglicized, Tory gentry kept away Liberal, nonconformist, nationalists even more completely: in Cardiganshire in 1893, there were 105 Tory JPs to 17 Liberals.[50]

But as new middle-class wealth inexorably accumulated, and as the gentry's willingness and ability to discharge their traditional functions was eroded, the take-over of the bench by non-landed social groups could not be postponed indefinitely. Of the new magistrates appointed in England and Wales between 1867 and 1877, 16 per cent were middle class; but of those appointed between 1877 and 1887, the proportion had increased to 30 per cent. Indeed, in industrial areas like the North and West Ridings, self-made men had been put on the bench since the middle of the century; by the 1890s they were providing over half of the new appointments; and by the 1900s, they constituted a majority of all JPs for the first time.[51]

Likewise in Cheshire, an increasingly suburbanized county, the majority of the bench by the 1880s came from the professional and business, rather than the landowning sectors: the first Duke of Westminster might preside over the county, but he could no longer govern it without the aid of these new and non-landed men. And even in some rural areas, the same problem occurred, if there were insufficient resident gentry. In the Lindsey Division of Lincolnshire, professionals and businessmen from Grimsby were already in the majority by the 1880s.[52]

In the early part of that decade, most Lord-Lieutenants were Liberals, and so were more likely to be sympathetic to non-landed magistrates. But the Home Rule split changed this dramatically. In part, this was because most county magnates went over to the Unionists. But it was also that between 1885 and 1905, the Conservatives systematically appointed young patrician Lord-Lieutenants, in the hope that they might entrench themselves in power for a long period. Between 1886 and 1906, 36 of the 42 English Lord-Lieutenancies fell vacant, as well as most of them in Wales and Scotland, and the majority of the new appointees served for over twenty-five years.[53] Some, indeed, seemed virtually immortal: the Marquess of Bath was Lord-Lieutenant of Somerset from 1899 to 1945; Sir John Williams-Bulkeley presided over Anglesey from 1896 to 1942; and the Earl of Powis held the office in Shropshire from 1896 to 1951. By placing these young grandees at the apex of county government, the Conservatives hoped to perpetuate patrician dominance in the shires, and to ward off middle-class encroachment on to the bench. And to some extent, they succeeded: even as late as 1941, Lord Powis considered the claims of one woman to be a JP simply on the grounds that she was the wife of the MFH.[54]

But during the 1890s and the 1900s, the Liberal party first circumvented and then overturned this Conservative policy. For by gradually changing the manner in which magistrates were appointed, they effectively ended the Lord-Lieutenant's power of socially exclusive selection. Between 1892 and 1894, James Bryce was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and reassumed direct control of the nomination of magistrates for the County Palatine, which had previously been exercised by Tory Lord-Lieutenants. He personally appointed 257 new men, most of whom were either Liberals or members of the working class, or both.[55] And this deliberate policy, motivated by a mixture of party-political self-interest, and broader concerns of social justice and equity, was also followed by Lord Chancellor Herschell, who tried to put his own nominees on other county benches, in addition to the names forwarded to him by the Lord-Lieutenants. At the same time, the newly formed Welsh coun-

ty councils passed regular resolutions against the continued monopoly of Anglicans, Tories, and landowners on the bench.[56]

On their return to power with a great majority in 1906, the Liberals sought to make more fundamental alterations to the system of appointment. In that year, they abolished the £100 property qualification for a county magistrate; in 1907, the Lord Chancellor Loreburn encouraged the Lord-Lieutenant of Devon to appoint an advisory committee to help him with the nomination of JPs; and in 1910 he set up a Royal Commission to consider the whole question of appointments to the bench.[57] Its prime recommendation was that it should not be barred to men because of their religious or political views, and that magistrates should not be exclusively appointed from the narrow social circles of the county community. Accordingly, Loreburn insisted that in future, the nomination of magistrates should be in the hands of a committee, on which the Lord-Lieutenant need not necessarily even sit, and which could bypass him and go direct to the Lord Chancellor if he was a member and proved obstructive. As a result, JPs were gradually recruited from a much broader spectrum of society (which included women after 1918), and even in Shropshire, Lord Powis notwithstanding, ten working-class men were on the bench by 1940.[58]

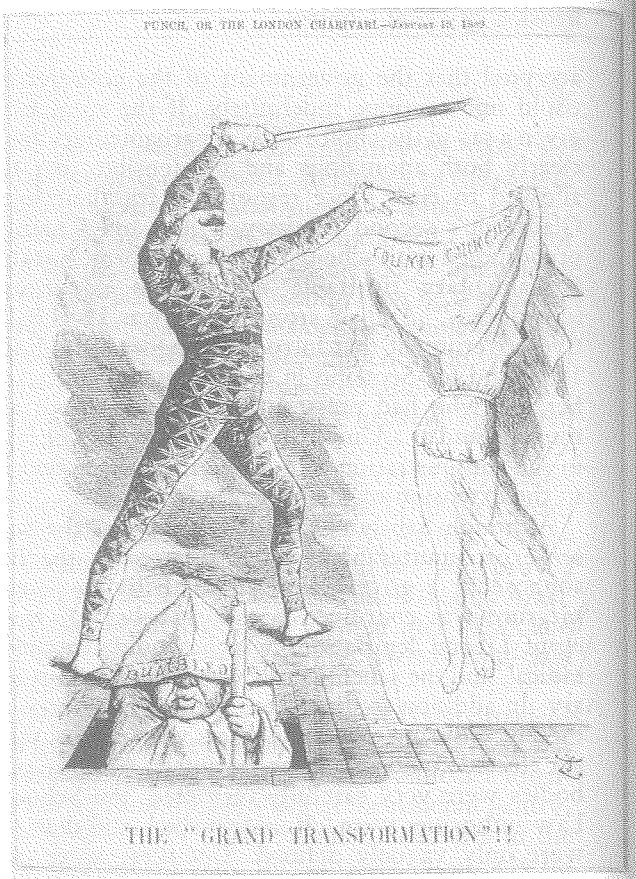
These Liberal measures meant that the trend towards the broadening of the social background of the county magistracy, which was already increasingly apparent by the 1880s, was only further intensified. The decline in the will and the numbers of the resident gentry, the growth of a new rural middle class, and these changes in the mode of appointment effectively ended the patrician monopoly on the bench in England and Wales, and of the Commissionerships of Supply in Scotland. Naturally, the precise rate and exact timing of the change depended on the particular economic and social structure of the county, but that was unmistakably the direction in which developments were moving. In Wales, and in the industrialized counties of England, the change was rapid and dramatic; in areas like Wiltshire or Norfolk, it was naturally rather slower paced. But one result was of more widespread significance: however broad his acres might (or might not) remain, the Lord-Lieutenant ceased to be a figure of real power and influence in the county, and increasingly became little more than a dignified ornamental, wearing a grand uniform to receive distinguished visitors.[59]

Even more important, a new system of county government was also being constructed, which further undermined the old system of resident landowner control. As Milnes Gaskell had predicted, it was not just that the traditional patrician magistracy was being diluted, it was also being superseded. By the mid-1880s, it was generally

accepted that the government of the counties by quarter sessions could not continue indefinitely. If the rural labourers were to be given a say in the choice of their parliamentary representatives, it was clearly both anomalous and indefensible that they should not be allowed to elect those responsible for their local government. In Gladstone's second ministry, Dilke and Chamberlain were much preoccupied with schemes for such reform, but the congestion of the parliamentary timetable meant that no measure was actually introduced.[60] And so, ironically, it was Lord Salisbury's Conservative government that introduced reform, for England and Wales in 1888, and for Scotland in the following year. According to Chamberlain, who had pressed for a measure both as a Liberal cabinet minister and as a Unionist, the result would be 'a peaceful revolution in the administration of our counties . . . second in importance only to the extension of the franchise.'[61]

Although Salisbury rightly feared that the squires would feel a sense of 'unutterable wrong' suffered at the hands of what was supposedly a government sympathetic to patrician concerns, the measure was conceived conservatively.[62] It was designed to preempt Liberal legislation, which would certainly have been more radical, and the scheme itself was in many ways far from revolutionary. In addition to an elected council, aldermen could be co-opted, thereby ensuring that landowners who did not stand or who failed to get elected could in fact be recruited. And the powers of these new bodies were very carefully restricted: the School Boards and Poor Law authorities were left undisturbed, and their own responsibilities were only vaguely defined. But there were two major changes. However falteringly and restrictedly, the democratic principle had indeed been introduced into rural administration, and the hereditary and oligarchic principle had been discarded. Moreover, by carving separate and autonomous county boroughs out of the shires, the integrity of the county community was undermined, and the resources of the new authority were correspondingly limited.

Inevitably, predictions varied as to what would be the results of the first elections. The Liberals feared that the landed interest would do well, the Conservatives that it would do badly. Lord Harrowby was worried that entrusting county administration to 'the untried and uncertain hands of those elected by popular vote must lead to confusion, bad management, suffering and expense.'[63] The *Quarterly Review* feared the rise of 'caucuses and wire pullers for distinctly party ends', and the departure of the 'devotion, sacrifice and high character of the English squires, who will no longer be at the helm.' Lord Powis thought that 'existing leading magistrates may get elected at first', but that power would soon pass to 'the farmer and



23. 'The "Grand Transformation"!!' *Punch*, 19 Jan. 1889.

shopkeeper or tradesman, who will gradually elbow out the gentry.' Lord Salisbury, by contrast, insisted that it was 'not a radical or revolutionary measure', and *The Times* felt that 'it is tolerably certain that the country gentry will secure sufficient representation upon the new county councils.'[64] But F. W. Maitland caught most vividly the sense that, regardless of the outcome, a major era in patrician history was drawing to its close: 'As a governor he is doomed; but there has been no accusation. He is cheap, he is pure, he is capable, but he is doomed; he is to be sacrificed to a theory, on the altar of the spirit of the age.'[65]

How, in practice, did the elections work out? In England, it is clear that the worst forebodings were not realized, as the old ruling élite remained the largest single element in the new county councils. Throughout the country as a whole, slightly over one-half of all newly elected county councillors were magistrates, and two-thirds of the counties elected the chairman of quarter sessions or the Lord-

Lieutenant as the chairman of the new county council. Many of the seats were not contested; most gentry who stood were elected; those few defeated were usually co-opted as aldermen; and so were those who did not even deign to stand. The first act of the Shropshire County Council was to appoint the Lord-Lieutenant as an alderman. The Worcestershire County Council did exactly as Lord Beauchamp instructed it, even electing his complete slate of aldermen.[66] At Stafford, Lord Harrowby greeted his fellow councillors with positively patrician friendliness, including one man who turned out to be the porter. And in Devon, it was observed with surprise that 'the gathering looked much like quarter sessions . . . landlordism and squirearchy were in conspicuous force.'[67]

But this is not the whole of the picture, for if only one-half of the new county councillors were magistrates, the clear implication – given the growing infiltration of the county bench at that time by non-landowners – is that the territorial element was no longer in full control. And this was especially so in heavily builtup or industrialized counties, or in regions where the resident gentry were few and far between. In counties such as Kent and the West Riding, a peer or country gentleman was elected to the chair, but the majority of the councillors were already drawn from the business and professional classes.[68] In Durham, Lancashire, and Cheshire, the industrial and professional elements were so preponderant from the very beginning that they dispensed with aristocratic chairmen altogether.[69] And even in rural Lincolnshire, 'the gentry had been given notice that they should no longer expect to govern the county unchallenged'. Twelve magistrates were actually beaten at the polls, and in the Holland Division, the newly elected chairman was a Spalding wine merchant, not a JP.[70]

In Wales, the results were both less varied and less encouraging, as almost everywhere, the gentry and grandees were rebuffed and humiliated. For it was these local elections, even more than the parliamentary contests of 1880, 1885, and 1886, that emphatically marked the end of patrician ascendancy, as radicals, nationalists, and nonconformists triumphed almost everywhere. In the north, 175 of the 260 councillors were Liberals, and in the south, the figure was 215 out of 330.[71] Everywhere, the squires and grandees were rejected. In Caernarfon, the Lord-Lieutenant was defeated. In Montgomeryshire, Lord Powis' pre-eminent claim to the chair was passed over in favour of the Liberal squire Arthur Humphreys-Owen. And in Denbigh, Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn, still smarting from his electoral defeats in 1885 and 1886, was further humiliated when the council preferred Thomas Gee – a radical journalist, campaigner for church disestablishment, and President of the Welsh Land League –

as chairman.[72] Only in Brecon, with its highly Anglicized electorate, did the patricians survive in appreciable force. Elsewhere, they were almost totally wiped out by the nonconformist middle class.[73]

This is emphatically shown in the case of Cardiganshire, where the Liberals dominated the new council by a majority of 37 to 10.[74] Their backgrounds were exactly as expected: tenant farmers, small businessmen, shopkeepers, miners, and doctors. Only three major landowners were returned, Lord Lisburne, Colonel Davies-Evans, and Major Lewes. But others, such as Lloyd and Waddington, failed to secure election. Lisburne had hoped to be chairman, but was defeated by Peter Jones, a Methodist coal merchant from Aberystwyth. Almost at once, the council passed resolutions against the present method of appointing magistrates and in favour of church disestablishment. And the nationalists kept a firm hold on the appointment of committee chairmen and the co-option of aldermen. There was no obsequious or magnanimous recruitment of the vanquished gentry here. When speaking of the first elections, and arguing that 'the counties as a whole are not given to returning radical representatives', Lord Salisbury had been compelled to modify his remark by adding, 'I am afraid that in Wales I must speak with more caution.' How right he was.[75]

In Scotland, where the new county councils replaced the old Commissioners of Supply, the first elections were held in February 1889. Compared with England, fewer landowners stood; compared with Wales, more of them were successful. In Aberdeen, Lord Saltoun, Grant of Monymusk, and Farquharson of Haughton were defeated, and Lord Sempill withdrew before the poll. But these seem to have been unfortunate exceptions. In Ayr, the Hon. H. F. Elliot (who was also MP for the county) was elected; in Fife Sir Ralph Anstruther was successful; and in Kincardine the Hon. John Arbuthnott easily won his contest. Some patricians did not need to fight at all. Both Sir John Hay and Sir Graham Graham-Montgomery were returned unopposed in Peebles; and in Selkirk, the Earl of Dalkeith, heir to the Duke of Buccleuch, faced no contest.[76] But these few notables were decidedly atypical, as the overwhelming majority of the new county councillors came from the local middle classes: farmers, innkeepers, schoolteachers, clergymen, cattle salesmen, merchants, and businessmen. And in the Highlands, the crofting candidates put up by the Land League swept the board: in Sutherland they captured 14 out of the 16 contested seats.[77]

As in Wales, the patricians were thus in a minority in every Scottish county among the democratically chosen representatives: in electoral terms, there was a major transfer of power away from the traditional governing class. Nevertheless, in the lowlands and the

north-east (but not in the Highlands), the grandees were soon co-opted, as had been the practice in England. In Midlothian and Ayrshire, the preliminary meetings were presided over by Lord Rosebery and the Earl of Stair. In Roxburgh, Lord Polwarth, the Earl of Minto, the Marquess of Lothian, and the Duke of Roxburghe himself attended the first session.[78] And in almost every county, the elected convenor was a local landowner: peers like Balfour of Burleigh in Clackmannan, Camperdown in Forfar, and Elgin in Fife; and gentry like Cameron of Lochiel in Inverness, Maitland in Stirling, and Grant in Banff. But this was often more the façade than the substance of power. The office of convenor never carried the weight associated with the county-council chairmanship in England; and from the outset, these notables were responsible to elected bodies that were overwhelmingly non-patrician in composition.

When looking at these elections, it has been customary to stress their fundamentally conservative consequences; to accept at face value the many contemporary claims that county councils were but the old quarter sessions under a new name; and even to argue that the landowners' position was consolidated because their supremacy was no longer oligarchic, but was strengthened with the sanction of popular election. Nevertheless, Joseph Chamberlain was surely correct in seeing the events of 1888–9 as being almost as revolutionary as those of 1884–5.[79] Throughout Wales, and in those parts of England where industry was strong or the landowners were weak, the grandees and gentry had been brutally and deliberately rejected by the agrarian nationalists, or overwhelmed by middle-class businessmen and professionals. And in Scotland, the Land Leaguers triumphed in the Highlands, while elsewhere the patricians were very much the junior partners, who largely participated on the sufferance of their social inferiors. When Salisbury expressed his fear that the squires would be cross, he had good grounds to do so. In county government as in county representation, the 1880s saw the notables and magnificœs in conspicuous retreat, and that trend became only more pronounced during the ensuing half-century.

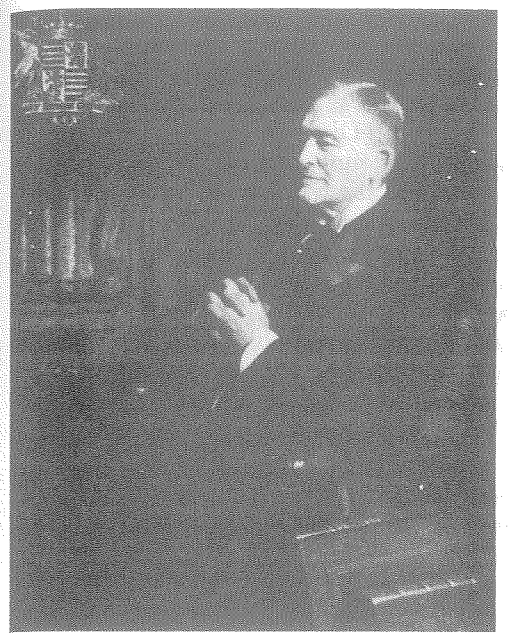
But it was, nevertheless, a slow and dignified withdrawal. In Scotland, the pattern established in 1889 survived in recognizable form until the Second World War. In 1892, two-thirds of the convenors of Scottish county councils were local landowners, seven were peers, and five were also Lord-Lieutenants. As late as 1940, half of these offices were filled by bona fide patricians, seven were peers, and ten were also Lord-Lieutenants. In Inverness-shire, once a radical and crofting county, Cameron of Lochiel and the Mackintosh of Mackintosh were, successively, both Lord-Lieutenant and convenor throughout most of this period. And during the inter-war years, the

Duke of Roxburghe was both convenor and Lord-Lieutenant in his titular county; Lord Home held both these offices in Lanark, where his eldest son was also a county MP; and so did the Duke of Buccleuch in Selkirk, where his younger brother also sat for a local constituency. In these last two cases, at least, the patrician families remained a real force, not just in county representation, but in county government too.

Likewise, in England, there were some counties where landed power remained of real importance into the 1920s and 1930s. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the eleventh Earl of Sandwich was Lord-Lieutenant of Huntingdonshire, first chairman of the county council, Mayor of Sandwich, and father of one of the county MPs. And his son followed him in many of these offices in the inter-war years.[80] The Duke of Bedford was the automatic first choice as chairman of Bedfordshire County Council, and he was succeeded by his relative, Lord Ampthill. In Wiltshire, power was divided between the Bath and Lansdowne families. The second chairman of the county council was Lord Fitzmaurice, who was also a local MP and chairman of quarter sessions, and whose brother, the Marquess of Lansdowne, was Lord-Lieutenant. And he was preceded by the fourth Marquess of Bath, and followed by the fifth, who was chairman of the county council from 1904 until 1945. In addition, Bath chaired the quarter sessions from 1890 until 1923, and was a long-serving Lord-Lieutenant of the neighbouring county of Somerset, for which his eldest son briefly sat as an MP in the 1930s.[81]

Elsewhere, the patricians survived through corporate rather than dynastic endeavour. In Shropshire, the council was chaired by a succession of local landowners, and seven members of the Powis family served as councillors or aldermen between 1889 and 1974. In Kent, there was a strong hereditary element provided by the Cornwallis family, who produced two chairmen in almost immediate succession.[82] And in Berkshire, a tightly-knit group of local gentry virtually monopolized the great county offices. Between 1889 and 1947, the chairmanship was held almost uninterruptedly by six successive members of the Mount, the Mowbray, and the Benyon families, all country gentry, who regularly provided Lord-Lieutenants of the county as well.[83] Even in Wales, the two most Anglicized counties conformed to this pattern. In Radnor, Charles Coltman Coltman Rogers was chairman of the county council from 1896 to 1929, and became Lord-Lieutenant in 1922; while in Brecon, Lord Glanusk held both positions before and after the First World War.

In localities such as these, it is clear that the nobles and notables



24. Lord Bath, chairman of the Wiltshire County Council, 1904–45.

survived more successfully as a major force in county government than they did in county politics. And this is easily explained. For it was largely a matter of deliberate choice and calculation, as many landowners decided to withdraw from national politics and constituency affairs, and to redirect their public endeavours into this new form of local administration. The work was less contentious, much less demanding, much less expensive, and much less risky to reputation than the rough and tumble of parliamentary public life. In the relative calm of the county council chamber, grandees like 'our much loved Lord Bath' could still dominate with a patrician style no longer acceptable in the Lords or the Commons or at the hustings.[84] They were no longer powerful yet controversial political figures, but presented themselves instead as loyal county men, and masters of county business, who successfully justified their inherited broad acres by disinterested, non-contentious public service. Aloof, Olympian, and detached, totally decent and totally incorruptible, they lent a tone of aristocratic grandeur to the proceedings, and elevated the whole level of county council business.

The evidence for this self-conscious shift of patrician priorities seems clear. In Bedfordshire, the eleventh duke did not wish to play any part in national politics, and saw his role on the county council as essentially an extension of Woburn estate management. In Huntingdonshire, the Sandwich family withdrew from politics entirely after

their defeat of 1906, and concentrated their efforts in local government thereafter. In Leicestershire, it was only after Sir John Hazlerigg had been defeated for the Melton Division in 1906 that he chose to direct his energies towards the county council.[85] In Inverness-shire, both Cameron of Lochiel and the Mackintosh of Mackintosh stood unsuccessfully for the county, and then withdrew into non-contentious local government. And in Radnor, Charles Coltman Coltman Rogers was MP for the borough constituency from 1884 to 1885, unsuccessfully contested the county in 1886, and thereupon withdrew from parliamentary politics and shifted his interests to local government. By contrast, those few aristocratic families who remained important in national affairs, like the Derbys, the Devonshires, and the Salisburys, had rather less time for day-to-day county council activity.[86]

But although this patrician persistence in local government provides some of the most emphatic evidence for the survival of the landed élite into the first half of the twentieth century, it must again be set in a broader perspective, and the façade and the substance must be distinguished. In Scotland, the number of county councils that were convened by grandees was markedly reduced by the 1930s, and in very few cases did real administrative dominance still coexist with local political influence. And in Wales, with the exception of Brecon and Radnor, the remaining gentry and grandees were little more than a marginal irrelevance. In 1892, the Liberals made more gains, and in 1904, they were in control of every Welsh county. By the inter-war years, Glamorgan, Carmarthen, and Monmouth were now dominated by the Labour party. 'Notable landowners still appeared as Lords Lieutenant, high sheriffs or JPs . . . They patronised local historical and antiquarian bodies . . . But their regime in real terms was dead.'[87]

In England, those county councils that had begun with middle-class businessmen and professionals in control continued as they had started. In Lancashire, the five successive chairmen between 1889 and 1937 were all drawn from the middle classes – a barrister, a colliery owner, a merchant, a *rentier*, and a retiree – and the chairmen of the most important committees were all of similar background. There were, indeed, representatives of the old county families to be found, but they were increasingly fobbed off with insignificant and unimportant jobs, and the Derbys were conspicuous by their absence.[88] In Cheshire, too, the professional and entrepreneurial middle classes had been in full control of the most important positions since 1889. Sir George Dixon was the only patrician chairman, but he never gained the personal ascendancy of a Bath or a Sandwich, and great county families like the Grosvenors had absented themselves completely by the inter-war years.[89] In shires such as these, with a vigorous and increasingly suburbanized middle class, they were in control throughout.

At the same time, many county councils, which had started out under patrician chairmanship, gradually began to move in the same direction. In the West Riding of Yorkshire, the first three chairman were Lord Ripon, John Dent, and Charles Milnes Gaskell himself. But by 1911, such men were thought to be increasingly unrepresentative of the council as a whole, and thereafter middle-class businessmen, on the model of those in Lancashire and Cheshire, were always preferred.[90] Even where landowners remained as chairmen, it was often the case that the council as a whole was ceasing to be dominated by the patricians. In the case of Kent, the middle-class business and professional element had been the majority from the very beginning, and by 1910 they had superseded the gentry as chairmen of the committees where most of the real business was decided. And even in rural, remote, and conservative Shropshire, the many members of the Powis family who served on the county council were never put in charge of any important committee. Very often, therefore, continued landed leadership was little more than a façade for increasing middle-class dominance.[91]

In fact, this was almost bound to happen. As Redlich and Hirst predicted in 1903, before the great sales of land had begun, the balance of administrative power in county government was certain to change if the balance of territorial influence altered. Just as the sale of estates effectively removed many patricians from constituency politics, so it also eliminated them from local government.[92] In some areas, on the Lincolnshire model, there were not enough resident gentry to retain power: in Devon by 1916, a middle-class businessman was in the chair because of the dearth of local notables. Moreover, not all landowners, even among those who stood in the 1889 elections, proved as interested or as tenacious as Lord Bath: in Cheshire, the Westminsters, Egertons, and Tollemaches occasionally deigned to turn up, but they were not prepared to do the real work. And so, as the middle-class element became more entrenched, they increasingly came to resent the airs and graces of such ornamental grandees, and after 1912 refused to co-opt them as aldermen, if they were not prepared to justify their places in terms of effort rather than status. Unlike the quarter sessions, the county council was not an extension of county society.[93]

Underlying this were major changes in the form and functioning of the county councils themselves. Initially, as Salisbury had intended, they were little more than quarter sessions under another name: their budgets were tiny, their responsibilities were limited,

and they employed only a small staff, with little professional expertise, who were often directly inherited from the earlier regime. But by the 1930s, the scale of their operations had been markedly expanded. In 1902, the county councils took over the functions of the School Boards, and in 1929 they also assumed the duties hitherto discharged by the Poor Law Guardians. In between, they were loaded with further responsibilities, for roads and hospitals, for planning and for libraries. The signs of this expansion were well displayed in the much-extended office accommodation, and in the greatly increased county council budgets: in Wiltshire, spending grew from less than £100,000 a year in the 1890s to over £1.5 million by the 1930s, and this was the common pattern.[94]

Yet paradoxically, growing responsibility inevitably led to diminished autonomy. Legislation from Westminster and instructions from Whitehall increasingly set the limits to county council freedom, and the new and necessary exchequer grants (which were soon providing more income than the rates) eroded fiscal independence as well. As a result, the county councils (like the constituency associations) were ceasing to be an instrument of local self-government, and were becoming instead the outworks of an intrusive centralized bureaucracy. At the same time, the massive proliferation of responsibility necessarily changed the nature of business. The plenary sessions of the council, with the chairman in charge, ceased to be of great significance, and the real work was increasingly done on the sub-committees. And as the business grew in bulk and complexity, it was the expert, full-time, local-government employees who acquired the dominant voice, not just in the implementation of policy, but in its formulation as well. To this extent, the patrician element on the county councils had not been undermined by the lower-class democrats – as had been feared initially – so much as by the upstart bureaucrats.[95]

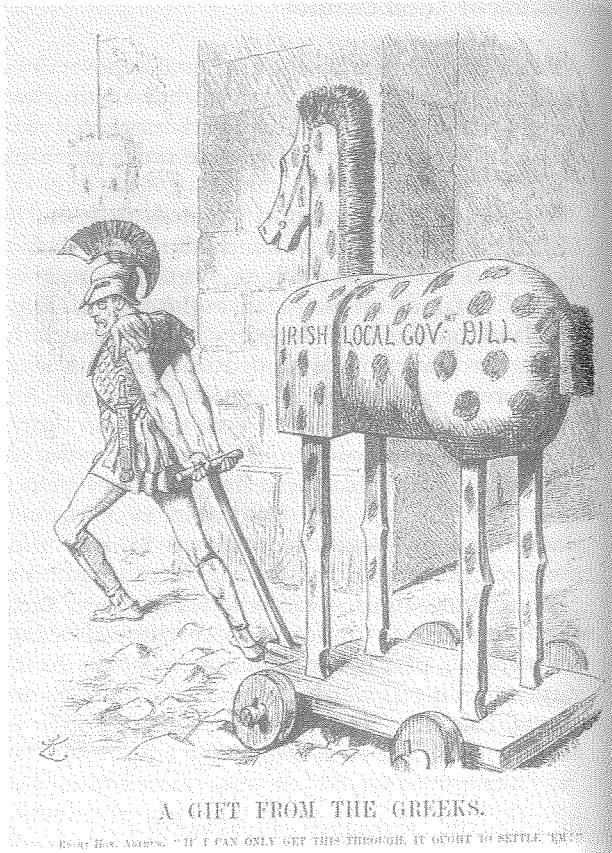
Whether the chairman of the council was an authentic grandee, a middle-class professional, or even a Labour party activist, these developments were commonplace throughout Great Britain. And so, by the 1930s, there were growing – and justified – complaints that the aldermen and elected councillors were increasingly ineffectual in the face of Whitehall interference and the permanent officials. When, in the 1930s, Lord Powis lamented that it would be 'an evil day for England' if unpaid councillors found their duties beyond them, he was effectively acknowledging that that day had already arrived. As Captain Jebb, another Shropshire councillor, explained, it was 'really difficult' for councillors to wield any influence, except in matters of detail: 'the big questions were slipped through without being properly investigated.'[96] And if that was true for a county

council like Shropshire – in a rural, conservative and agricultural region, with a tenacious gentry who remained well represented and often in the chair – then how much more so was this the case in those many British counties that were so much more urbanized and middle class?

By the 1930s, the county councils were no longer the old rural oligarchy under a new name, but a professional hierarchy and structured bureaucracy which might – or might not – be sheltering behind a façade of patrician authority. In England and much of Scotland (but not in Wales), it was not so much the democracy of the 1880s that undermined landed leadership in local government, but the bureaucracy of the twentieth century. Despite the deliberate diversion of effort in that direction by many patricians, their contribution to county government by the inter-war years was much less significant than it had been half a century before. During the long span of his Olympian chairmanship, even a grand seigneur like Lord Bath became less a chief executive, and more a constitutional monarch: no longer the driving force in administration and policy making, but a figure-head who leant a tone, and looked good in his Lord-Lieutenant's uniform on ceremonial occasions. As such, the aristocracy's part in the government of the countryside was increasingly moving towards that non-contentious and essentially ornamental role that, during the same period, they were perfecting and practising in the towns and in the empire.[97]

iii. Ireland: Ruritania and Revolution

Throughout Great Britain, patrician leadership in the shires had often declined well before the estates were actually sold, and it very rarely survived once they were actually disposed of. Yet in the case of Ireland, by contrast, it was a widely held belief that if only the landlords could be persuaded to part with their estates, popular hostility to them would then evaporate, and they would thus be able to play a renewed and enhanced role in the politics and government of the country. When introducing his Land Purchase scheme in 1890, Arthur Balfour claimed that if dual ownership was abolished, 'the influence of the landowners . . . will be greatly augmented.'[98] When sponsoring the Irish Local Government Bill of 1898, his brother Gerald made the same case: if the landlords would come forward to stand and serve, he predicted, 'their reward is certain.' And it was the same belief that underlay Horace Plunkett's policy of 'constructive unionism': 'the abolition of landlordism, so far from destroying the usefulness of the Irish gentry, really gives them their first opportunity, within the memory of living men, to fulfill the true function of



25. 'A Gift from the Greeks.' *Punch*, 27 Feb. 1892.

aristocracy.'[99] But in the event, it was an opportunity that most Irish patricians did not – and could not – take.

Until the late 1870s, in Ireland as in Great Britain, the landowning classes remained in control of local politics and national representation, and also of local government and the administration of justice. Even the success of Isaac Butt's Home Rule Party in the 1874 general election only slightly diminished the massive phalanx of landed MPs sent by Ireland to Westminster. Here, still more completely than in Wales, it was the contest of 1880 that saw the nobles and notables routed. The successful mobilization of anti-landlord sentiment by the Land League meant that patrician MPs were turned out, not only in the south, but also in Donegal, Tyrone, Fermanagh, and Cavan, those parts of Ulster that were seriously threatened by nationalist agitation.[100] A country gentleman like A. M. Kavanagh, who had represented Carlow, his local county constituency, for fourteen

years, was devastated when rejected even by his own tenantry: 'The majority of my men broke their promise to me . . . That is the poisoned stab.' Indeed, the roll-call of patrician casualties reads like the pages of *Debrett*: 'Gone', lamented Frank Hugh O'Donnell, 'gone Lord Francis Conyngham, gone the O'Conor Don, gone the Hon. Charles ffrench.'[101]

So, in Ireland as in Wales and in parts of England and Scotland, the writing was on the wall for the gentry and grandees as parliamentary representatives, even before the Third Reform Act was passed: that measure, which massively increased the Irish electorate from 222,000 to 740,000, merely confirmed and accentuated developments already under way.[102] As in Great Britain, the 1885 election brought devastation in the wake of redistribution, and the 1886 election largely – if not entirely – confirmed these trends. For the net result was effectively to exclude the traditional territorial classes from any further participation in the constituency affairs and political representation of Ireland, except in some parts of Ulster. Here was a political revolution of the greatest magnitude, well displayed in the fact that, at the 1885 election, not one of the 52 candidates put up in the south by the newly established and landlord-controlled Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union was elected.[103] And even in Ulster, in 1885, the nationalist and tenant-right candidates did unexpectedly well, winning a majority of the seats in the province.[104] The result was a patrician rejection even more abrupt and complete than in Wales.

What happened thereafter? Did the nobles and notables claw something back from the débâcle, as in England, or did they abdicate through lack of choice, as in Wales? In most of Ireland, the landlords had vanished never to return, and parliamentary representation was taken over by small-town, middle-class nationalists as in Wales: doctors, solicitors, and merchants to begin with, but becoming inexorably more plebeian as the century drew on. Of the 86 Home Rule MPs elected in 1886, only 5 were landowners; of the 94 returned between 1906 and 1910, there were only 7, and the proportion in between was essentially the same.[105] And this was a deliberate policy on the part of the nationalists. The selection of candidates was now in the hands of middle class and petty bourgeois constituency organizers, with occasional interference from Dublin. And with rare exceptions, they were determined to keep the landowners out, even those few who were favourable to their cause. In 1893, at a by-election in West Mayo, there was some support in nationalist circles for Colonel Blake, a local landlord. But interference from John Dillon, and the power of the slogan 'No landlord from Mayo', prevented him from gaining the nomination.[106]

In terms of parliamentary representation, the patricians effectively

disappeared as the governing class of Ireland in the 1880s. And, unlike some of their English cousins, they failed to retain (or regain) control of the constituency organizations. The few exceptions merely prove the rule. Very occasionally, a Unionist landowner might get elected for a short spell, like the Hon. M. H. F. Morris in Galway in 1900. Others might serve briefly as anti-Parnell nationalists, like the Hon. J. B. B. Roche for East Kerry from 1896 to 1900, and the Hon. Edward Blake for Longford South from 1892 to 1907. But throughout the period from the 1880s to the First World War, only three bona fide patricians were long-serving nationalist MPs. The most famous was Charles Stewart Parnell himself, who was elected for County Mayo in 1880, but preferred to represent Cork City until his death in 1891. And the others were a brace of nationalist, Catholic baronets: Sir Walter Richard Nugent, who sat for his local constituency, Westmeath South, from 1907 until 1918; and Sir Thomas Grattan Esmonde who represented County Dublin South, West Kerry, and North Wexford between 1885 and 1918.

But it was only in parts of Ulster that non-maverick notables were able to reassert themselves in a manner reminiscent of some English constituencies. The Home Rule issue effectively closed the rift that had been developing between the tenant farmers and their landlords, and allowed the patricians to place themselves at the head of both the revived Orange Order and the new constituency associations from 1886.[107] In East Antrim, the Unionist Association was formed by Colonel James MacCalmont of Maghnermorne, who was both a local landowner and a major figure in the Orange Order. He was the county MP from 1885 until his death in 1913; he had to face only one seriously contested election; and on his death, he was succeeded by his son, without a contest. In the same county, the O'Neills remained a formidable power, and one seat was filled by three successive members of the family. In County Down, the traditional rivalry of the Londonderry and Downshire families was transformed by Home Rule into Unionist collaboration, and one of the seats was usually held by a Hill or a Vane-Tempest. And in parts of Tyrone, the Abercorns still held sway, even providing a family MP for Londonderry city between 1901 and 1913.[108]

But however hard the Ulster patricians worked to adjust themselves to the new world of democratic politics, their control of county constituencies was – as in England – increasingly the exception rather than the rule. In the shires where the Catholic nationalists were in the majority – Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan – the landowners were as powerless as their cousins in the south, and nationalist MPs were returned, uninterruptedly and unchallenged. In County Fermanagh, which had been dominated by the Archdales

since the eighteenth century, the division of the constituency and the extension of the franchise meant the Protestant electors were now a minority, and in 1885 the nationalists captured both seats.[109] Although one seat returned to the Unionists in 1895, it was held by Richard Dane, an unorthodox MP, who was in favour of 'compulsory sale and purchase.' And in Tyrone, the Abercorns' grip was fading. T. W. R. Russell, who held one of the seats from 1886 to 1918, was leader of the Ulster Tenants Defence Association: hardly the platform of a landlord's candidate. And when Lord James Hamilton succeeded to the Abercorn dukedom in 1913, the Londonderry seat was lost.[110]

In short, the Ulster patricians' counter-attack on the forces of democratic nationalism in the aftermath of Home Rule was by no means everywhere successful. And there was a further challenge that was even harder to rebuff, since it came from within. From the 1880s, the province was dominated, both politically and economically, by the town of Belfast, and it was its burgeoning plutocracy that superseded the landowners as the leading Protestant influence in Ulster politics.[111] Of the twenty-odd Unionist MPs who were regularly returned for the province from the mid-1880s, the majority were middle-class businessmen and entrepreneurs like Harland and Wolf. The real driving forces in Ulster Unionism were not so much the traditional landowners like Colonel Saunderson, who was leader of the Ulster Unionist Parliamentary Party from 1886 to 1906, but Belfast businessmen like Craig and Bates. Significantly, when Saunderson tried to insinuate a patrician candidate into Belfast in 1886, he was firmly told that this was not his province. But conversely, from 1906, one of the MPs for County Down was James Craig himself, Ulsterman and businessman *par excellence*.[112]

So, despite the sales of estates that gathered force under the Land Acts during the 1890s and 1900s, the Irish gentry and aristocracy did not return to the public life of Ireland in the way that the Balfour brothers and Horace Plunkett had hoped they would. Even more than in Wales, the early 1880s were the great turning point. Throughout the south, and in parts of Ulster, where the forces of agrarian nationalism were irresistible, they had effectively disappeared from the political scene. And even where they reasserted themselves in the north, it was essentially on the sufferance of, and in collaboration with, the big bourgeoisie of Belfast. For while the landowners were in territorial retreat, the Belfast businessmen were at the peak of their prosperity and power in the years before the First World War. Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that the partnership should become increasingly unequal. Caught between a triumphant peasantry in the south, and an irresistible plutocracy in

the north, there was little room left within which the patricians could recapture or exert the political initiative.

In the realm of local government, this pattern was almost exactly repeated. As the last quarter of the nineteenth century opened, the aristocracy and gentry were still emphatically in control: of the grand juries, of the Poor Law Boards, and of the magistracy. As late as 1886, over half the magistrates were landlords, and more than three-quarters were Protestants. But the attack on these local bases of patrician power was as sudden, and as successful, as the attack on parliamentary representation. In the late 1870s, one aspect of the 'Land League's campaign' was that Parnell determined to drive the landlords from their dominance of the Poor Law Boards. At that time, one-half of the seats were occupied ex officio by the JPs, and the elected representatives were usually their clients and retainers. Of the three major offices (chairman, vice chairman, and deputy chairman), 87 per cent were held in 1877 by landowners, including 161 of the 163 chairmanships. But in 1881, Parnell publicly urged that 'all exertions are to be made to secure the return of Land League candidates as Poor Law Guardians, and to drive from office the agents, bailiffs and landed nominees who have hitherto been allowed to fill these important posts.'[113]

This systematic attempt to capture these elected positions was astonishingly successful, not least because a majority of the elected posts usually brought with it power over the whole board, since many of the ex-officio Guardians were absentee. By 1886, the tenants had so completely overwhelmed the patricians and their clients that they had captured half the major offices throughout the country. More especially, this meant that they were in almost total control of the Boards in the south, the west, and central Ireland. Only in parts of Ulster, and in southern enclaves like Wicklow and Dublin, did the grandees and gentry hang on. The nationalist MP, William O'Brien, may have been overstating it when he later recalled that 'as if by one universal impulse the country rose . . . swept the landlords from the old ascendancy at the Poor Law Boards, and put the most advanced of suspects in their places'.[114] But he was essentially correct. At the very time that the landowners were decisively rejected in local politics, they were also emphatically rejected in local government. On the Poor Law Boards, as in the parliamentary constituencies, revolution had come before reform.[115]

Even before Irish local government was fundamentally restructured on the British model, there had thus been two major developments in the localities: the balance of power had effectively passed from the patricians to the peasantry; and in most areas, there were already hundreds of experienced nationalist administrators.

And faced with the imminent prospect of local government reform, the landowners naturally feared that the nationalists would dominate the new county councils as they already controlled the Poor Law Boards. Not surprisingly, Balfour's first – and abortive – bill, introduced in 1892, contained many novel features, which were intended to protect the beleaguered landed minority. On the English model, the intention was to transfer the functions of the old grand juries to new county councils. But their powers were quite exceptionally limited. They could be dissolved for disobedience to the law, for corruption, for malversation, and for the suppression of minorities. The attempt to insert patrician safeguards was clear. But as a result, the bill seemed so anomalous compared with the British system that it did not pass.[116]

Accordingly, when Balfour's brother Gerald introduced a second and successful scheme in 1898, the checks and balances were removed, the franchise was made broader than that for parliamentary elections, and any claim to be making special provision for 'minority representation' was given up. With the Welsh precedent in mind, the outcome of the first elections – held in April 1899 – was thus a foregone conclusion: in Ernest Barker's words, 'the squirearchy was dethroned, and local self-government . . . took its place.'[117] Even in Ulster, the patricians fared no better than they did in parliamentary politics. Antrim, Armargh, and Down returned predictable Unionist majorities; Tyrone and Fermanagh were almost evenly divided; but Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan were overwhelmingly nationalist. In Antrim and Down (and even in Tyrone), the first chairman of the new county council was also the Lord-Lieutenant, on the model of the more conservative English and Scottish counties. But taking the nine counties as a whole, the nationalists were definitely in the majority with 95 seats to 86, and also possessed overall control of the Poor Law Boards.[118]

Elsewhere in Ireland, the grandees and gentry were almost totally rejected. Indeed, this was so obviously going to be the outcome that most ignored Gerald Balfour's exhortation to stand for election. Compared with England and Wales in 1888, the patrician candidates were decidedly thin on the ground. And those who were successful were very few and far between: Lord Powerscourt and Viscount Milton in Wicklow; Walter Kavanagh in Carlow; Lord Castlemaine in Westmeath; Lord Dunraven in Limerick; and the O'Conor Don in Roscommon. But there were also some famous casualties: Lord Rosse in Kings County; Lords Fitzgerald and Mayo in Kildare; and Lord Dunalley in Tipperary, where he obtained only four votes. In Leinster, Munster, and Connaught, every county was won by the nationalists, who obtained 456 seats to the Unionists' 39.[119] With

this overwhelming majority, they soon passed resolutions in favour of Home Rule, and in one case even raised the nationalist flag. As the *Morning Post* rightly remarked, 'it would have been absurd to expect that in the first flush of their new powers, the democratic electorates of the Irish Counties should have returned the landed gentry, whom they had been taught to regard as hereditary enemies and oppressors.'[120]

Nor, in later elections, did the old territorial class succeed in clawing back any of the ground they had so decisively lost in 1899. When introducing his measure, Gerald Balfour had predicted that the patricians 'may meet with rebuffs at first, but let them persevere, and their reward is certain.' But events did not bear him out.[121] In the 1902 elections, the balance of power remained essentially unaltered: Lords Milton, Powerscourt, Monteagle, and the O'Conor Don retired; and Lords Greville, Nugent, and Emly were defeated. Three years later, the Unionists won a handful of extra seats in Ulster; but again, the overall position was unchanged.[122] In Ireland, as in Wales, most of the new county councils were from the outset a bastion of anti-landlord sentiment. With rare exceptions like Kavanagh in Carlow, and Esmonde in Wicklow, there was very little scope for patrician leadership in Munster, Leinster, or Connaught. In England and Scotland, some grandees happily and successfully diverted their local efforts from contentious constituency management to disinterested county government: but for most Irish notables, there was no such opportunity beyond the narrow and embattled confines of the Protestant heartlands of Ulster.

So, by the 1910s, there was virtually nothing left of the old ascendancy class as the governing and parliamentary élite of Ireland. As JPs, the patricians had effectively ceased to signify: the Liberal reforms of the 1900s led to a massive increase in the appointment of Catholic (and thus non-landed) magistrates; and in much of Ireland, the gentry had abandoned their judicial functions to the Resident Magistrates. All that remained was a faded pantomime of ornamental and anachronistic duties. The grand juries, shorn of their real power after 1898, continued to gather at the opening of the assizes, to receive the judge's address. The post of High Sheriff was still filled by the local gentry, but when Colonel O'Callaghan-Westropp was appointed in Clare in 1919, not even Dublin Castle knew what his duties were. The Lieutenants of each county were little more than figure-heads, while the lavish and glittering proconsular regime maintained at Dublin was very largely a charade. The Lord-Lieutenant was rarely a figure of real distinction, and in terms of his functions, he was by now essentially a 'constitutional monarch.'[123]

The parliamentary and local elections of 1918 and 1920 merely confirmed that the patricians had become all but totally irrelevant to Irish affairs. In 1918, 73 of the 105 Irish seats at Westminster were won by Sinn Fein, 26 by the Ulster Unionists, and only 6 by the old constitutionalist Home Rule Party. Even those two maverick baronets, Esmonde and Nugent, were defeated by this new form of revolutionary nationalism. At the most generous estimate, only a handful of these Irish MPs could be associated with the landed establishment, and they were a minority, even in Ulster. And after the local elections of 1920, Sinn Fein controlled 28 of the 33 county councils, and 138 of the 154 Poor Law Boards.[124] In Ulster, the nationalists captured Tyrone County Council, and increased their majority in Fermanagh, where they appointed Thomas Corrigan as Secretary, a man who had been a founder member of Sinn Fein in the county, and had been imprisoned in 1918 and 1919. And they at once passed a resolution pledging their loyalty, not to Belfast, but to the provisional nationalist government in Dublin.[125]

How, then, did these few embattled, beleaguered patrician remnants fare in the new system of government created for the north and south of Ireland in the aftermath of the rebellion, the partition, and the troubles? What hope remained for an élite whose estates were disappearing at an increasingly rapid rate, and whose houses were going up in smoke? What room would be left to them, by the triumphant middle-class Unionists in the north, and the rampant Catholic nationalists in the south? In Ulster, under the Government of Ireland Act, a separate constitution came into being for the six counties, providing for a governor, a cabinet, and a bicameral legislature with limited powers. In the south, this act never came into effective operation, and the constitution finally evolved for Eire was largely the creation of the Irish Treaty. This provided for two houses of parliament, the Dáil and the Senate, with the latter elected on a more narrow franchise, and with inbuilt safeguards for minorities. How, in this new world, did the remnants of the old order survive? And how far did their circumstances continue to diverge between north and south?

Beyond doubt, the new regime in Ulster provided some scope for continued patrician initiative and endeavour. Indeed, in many ways, it closely resembled a particularly traditional English county council. For most of this period, the Governor of Northern Ireland was the Duke of Abercorn, the foremost grandee in the province. He represented a great Ulster family, knew the six counties well, was personally liked and respected, and almost certainly 'exercised considerable indirect influence upon ministers.'[126] In the cabinet, the first Minister of Education was the Marquess of Londonderry, and on his

resignation in 1926 he was replaced by Lord Charlemont. One of his colleagues, the Minister of Agriculture and Commerce, was E. M. Archdale of Fermanagh. And in 1933 he was followed by his near neighbour, Sir Basil Brooke. From 1921 until his death in 1930, the first Speaker of the Senate was Lord Dufferin, while the Speakers of the Lower House were, successively, the eldest surviving son of Lord O'Neill and the son of Lord Dunleath. To these should be added a smattering of authentically aristocratic MPs, one of whom was the wife of the Marquess of Donegall.[127]

At the same time, Ulster retained both its Westminster representation and its county government, and here, too, the patricians were still in evidence. Sir R. W. H. O'Neill was not only the Speaker of the lower house at Stormont: he also represented an Antrim County constituency at Westminster in the family tradition. And in the same way, in 1931, Viscount Castlereagh was elected unopposed in the Londonderry constituency of County Down. The Lord-Lieutenants of the six counties continued to be drawn from the ranks of the resident noblemen – like Londonderry himself – while gentry remnants still did duty as High Sheriff. County councils like Tyrone, Down, and Antrim remained well endowed with patrician chairmen. And even Fermanagh was won back to Unionist politics and ascendancy leadership in the aftermath of partition: a member of the Archdale family became chairman, while Lord Belmore served uninterruptedly from 1900 to 1946, and became chairman of the Education Committee.[128] In all these ways – both new and old – the grandees and gentry survived and governed in Ulster much as before: there was about the six counties more than just a touch of Ruritania.

Nevertheless, as its history from the 1880s inevitably implied, Ulster was neither created nor governed by the patricians, but by the Belfast business community. The most emphatic proof of this was the way in which the boundaries themselves were drawn for the province. In the 1918 election, the Unionists won no seats whatsoever in Cavan, Donegal, or Monaghan, and it seemed clear that, if these three counties were included in Ulster, the Unionist majority in the province would be precarious. Despite protests from resident landowners like Lord Farnham, who did not wish to be abandoned to the south, the Belfast businessmen had their way, and the smaller unit of six counties was chosen, while these three counties were abandoned to the south. By 1937, 63 per cent of Ulster's population lived within thirty miles of the city. And while Belfast thrived, the landowners were weakened still further: in 1925, the British Parliament rounded out the earlier land-purchase legislation, introducing an element of compulsion for Ulster, which brought the landed

ascendancy finally to an end; and in 1935, lay JPs were no longer allowed to sit with RMs, who thus took over the administration of justice almost completely.[129]

Under these circumstances, the patricians were very much the minority partner in the government and administration of the province. The real power lay elsewhere. From 1921 until his death in 1940, the Prime Minister was James Craig, the most resourceful and intransigent Ulsterman, whose background was in business and finance. And he was succeeded by J. M. Andrews, another businessman, who had previously been Minister of Labour, and who was also chairman of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce. In the cabinet of 1921, Archdale and Londonderry were given the two least important posts: after Craig himself, and Andrews at Labour, the men who mattered were Pollock (another businessman) who was Minister of Finance, and Bates (a solicitor and former Secretary of the UDF) at Home Affairs.[130] And it was Bates and Craig who were responsible for the legislation of the early 1920s, which altered the franchise, led to the setting up of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and the passing of the Special Powers Act. It was these measures, promoted by these men, that were the key to the making and management of Ulster: by comparison, the patrician contribution was dignified rather than efficient.[131]

If this was the most that the gentry and grandees could salvage in Ulster, their prospects in the newly independent south were bleak indeed. Their hopes were pinned on a second chamber that might safeguard their minority interests, and also give them a platform for playing a part in the public life of the new nation. Moreover, the Irish leaders, Griffiths and O'Higgins, seemed genuinely eager to offer them 'their full share of representation in the first chamber of the Irish parliament'.[132] There was to be a Senate; it was to be elected for a twelve-year term and on a narrow franchise; and half of the first house was to be nominated by the Prime Minister with special regard to minority interests. In the event, O'Higgins recruited many of his nominees from the old patrician class: Lords Dunraven, Wicklow, and Mayo, the Earl of Kerry (son of Lord Lansdowne), the dowager Countess of Desart, Sir Thomas Esmonde, Sir William Hutcheson Poe, Sir John Keane, Sir Horace Plunkett, General Sir Bryan Mahon and John Bagwell. As O'Higgins magnanimously explained, he had made 'a generous adjustment, to show that these people are regarded, not as alien enemies, not as planters, but that we regard them as part and parcel of this nation, and that we wish them to take their share of its responsibilities.'[133]

But in practice, these aristocratic Senators accomplished and contributed very little. In part, this was because they were forcibly and

illegally prevented from doing so. De Valera and Sinn Fein had refused to recognize either the Irish Treaty or the Free State Constitution, and during 1922 and 1923, they conducted a sustained campaign of terror against O'Higgins's nominated notables. Sir William Hutcheson Poe was held up by the Irregulars in Queen's County; his watch and money were stolen and his car burned; and he retreated to England, although he did continue to attend some Senate meetings. The Earl of Mayo's home, Palmerstown, in County Kildare, was raided by armed men. The Earl and Countess were forced to leave; the house was burned down and only three paintings were saved; and they were obliged thereafter to live in the servants' quarters. John Bagwell fared even worse: his house in Tipperary was burned and its contents destroyed in January 1923, and later in the same month, he himself was kidnapped near Dublin. And Plunkett, Keane, Desart, and Esmonde suffered at least as much.[134]

These attacks eventually came to an end, but they did not make it easy for such figures to play any real part in Irish political life: they were worried about their property and their relatives; they were increasingly absentee in England; and they had little enthusiasm for leading a nation the majority of whose inhabitants seemed so implacably and aggressively hostile. And in any case, the Senate's powers of scrutiny and delay were minimal, and no member of the executive could sit there. The quality of the debates was often high, but had little bearing on events. Above all, the confidence, poise, and purpose of the old ascendancy class was broken.[135] Effectively, the notables had been out of power in Ireland for half a century, and they were quite incapable of responding to this new opportunity – minimal as it was. Increasingly, they withdrew into a ghetto-like mentality, sneering ineffectively at the education, the brogue, and the manners of the ministers, the men of power. They were not even willing or able to stand up for themselves. In 1923, when Sir John Keane tried to thwart the government's proposal to complete land purchase by compulsory means, his fellow patricians in the Senate would not even support him.[136]

Moreover, the death of O'Higgins in 1927, and the return of de Valera's party to the Dáil meant that the Senate's days were soon numbered. Because of its restricted powers and idiosyncratic composition, it was easily presented as irrelevant, anachronistic, and obstructionist. Between 1923 and 1934, Poe, Plunkett, Dunraven, and Kerry resigned; while Wicklow, Nugent, and Esmonde failed to secure re-election. After O'Higgins's initial nominations, there were few patrician recruits, apart from Sir Edward Bellingham in 1925 and the McGillicuddy of the Reeks three years later.[137] For de Valera, anxious to implement a new form of more extreme Catholic nationalism, the Senate stood as 'a remnant, a part of the defensive armour of the ascendancy class', which was 'in favour of vested interests and privilege', and against 'the march of the people and their rights.' In 1934, he introduced a bill to abolish the upper house, and two years later, it ceased to exist, and was replaced with a new body in the following year which was entirely the creature of the Dáil. As Lord Midleton had predicted in 1922, the Senate had failed to be either a safeguard for patrician interests or a springboard for patrician aspirations.[138]

In the lower house of the Free State legislature, the ascendancy's representation was totally insignificant. As if out of family tradition, several members of the Esmonde family were returned, and so was a Barton of Glendalough. But the only significant patrician was Bryan Cooper, whose family owned Markree Castle in County Sligo. In 1910, he had been elected Unionist MP for Dublin County South, but his service in the First World War caused him to take a more sympathetic view of nationalist aspirations. In 1923, he was elected to the Dáil as an independent member for the same constituency.[139] 'Regarding himself as a representative of a virtually unrepresented minority, he acted as one might have expected an ex-unionist brought up in the country gentleman's tradition to act.' He was a cosmopolitan figure, who believed that Ireland must become more internationalist and less introverted; his interests in peace, order, and tranquility, and in decency and economy in government, were classic signs of patrician disinterestedness. In the end, his loyalty to Cosgrave and hatred of de Valera drove him out of politics: and he was the last significant and self-conscious representative of the old order in the lower house.

Predictably, there was much less scope for the once pre-eminent territorial élite in de Valera's Eire than in Craig's Ulster. In the Gaelic, Catholic, nationalist, and proletarian south, there was no room, and still less enthusiasm, for the old landed ascendancy. Betrayed by the British and hated by the Irish, the surviving patricians turned in upon themselves. Their 'abdication of political responsibility at a national and local level was disappointing, but understandable.'[140] In effect, they had ceased to be the governing class of Ireland in the 1880s: only a romantic or a reactionary could have hoped they might be rehabilitated in inter-war Eire. In Ulster, the outcome was different, yet not as different as it seemed. They survived with greater ease: but increasingly on the sufferance – and essentially as the clients – of the bourgeoisie of Belfast. Either way, the fond hopes that the solution of the land problem would enable the old territorial ascendancy to recover its dominant part in Irish affairs had proved vain. Instead of giving them a new lease of life,

their territorial demise merely made their political demise more easy and more certain.

iv. Conclusion: 'The End of the Notables'

When, during the inter-war years, King George V paid official visits to different parts of Great Britain, he was usually met – and sometimes accommodated – by the Lord-Lieutenant of the county. He might be a personal friend of his sovereign, he would almost invariably be a patrician, and in holding the position he did, was probably following in his forebears' footsteps. In the same way, when the King paid his memorable visit to Northern Ireland in 1922, opened the Ulster Parliament, and appealed to Irishmen to forgive and forget, he stayed in suitably splendid style with the Duke and Duchess of Abercorn. Such episodes were vivid reminders that during the 1920s and 1930s, the traditional territorial classes remained a visible presence in local affairs throughout the shires of the United Kingdom. And in some cases, these grandees combined ornamental splendour with real and significant influence – as the chairman of a county council or as the dominating force in a constituency association. Under these circumstances, the local power that they wielded was probably as much efficient as it was decorative.

But even allowing for this very real evidence of aristocratic survival as an ornamental (or influential) force in the government and politics of the shires, it is the challenges to their power, and the weakening of their position, that stand out as the major themes during the years from the 1880s to the 1930s. In Wales, most of Ireland, and parts of Scotland, the forces of anti-landlord agrarian nationalism were irresistible. In Ulster, and in the most heavily industrialized counties of England, the middle-class professionals, businessmen, and *rentiers* were no less inexorable in their advance. The agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century undoubtedly forced many notables to withdraw from county administration and constituency politics, and the great land sales of 1910–22 only intensified this development. At the same time, the extensions of the franchise in 1885 and 1918, and the reform of local government in 1888–9 and 1898, fundamentally weakened their position still further. And the remorseless professionalization of local government throughout the United Kingdom spelt the end of the amateur, patrician style in county administration. At the local level, no less than at the national, bureaucracy was the enemy of aristocracy.

In short, the attack on the aristocracy as the rulers and representatives of the localities was on a broad and varied front, and it occurred at a time, and in such a way, that most of them were not well

equipped, or well disposed, to resist it. The timing and extent of their abdication necessarily varied from country to country, and region to region. But by the 1930s, there were very few shires left where the surviving landowners could accurately (or exclusively) be described as the local power élite. And if such men were no longer either governing or representing the localities, then what did this imply for them as the governors and representatives of the nation?

disenchantment duly came in 1945, when Churchill himself – in his moment of supreme triumph – was dismissed by the electorate from any further conduct of their affairs. Overnight, the saviour of his country became once again what he had been in the 1930s, before his encounter with destiny: a marginal anachronism, an aristocratic antique. Four years earlier, when speaking of the ordinary people, Churchill had remarked, 'they have saved this country; they have the right to rule it.'[105] After six long years of unprecedented deprivations, how would the patricians respond, and what could they possibly hope for, when a socialist government – overwhelmingly elected in the people's name – began to exercise those rights in earnest?

14

THE END OF THE AFFAIR

> Was there an upper class in post war Britain? . . . If you belong to the upper classes yourself, you may well be aware of the distinction between a true landed aristocrat and a successful industrialist; if you belong to the classes below, the distinction may not be apparent, let alone real.
>
> (A. Marwick, *British Society Since 1945* (1982), pp. 39–40.)

> Today, the coherence of the country-house world, which survived, even if under stress, up till the Second World War, has largely vanished. Many country houses have been destroyed, and many more are no longer privately owned . . . Even if a considerable number belong to families who have owned them for many generations, such families could no longer conceivably be described as a ruling class.
>
> (M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (1978), pp. 316–18.)

> Aristocracy does not stand up well to misfortune. It is a fair weather way of life. Noblemen demonstrate a highly developed sense of class consciousness when they are on top . . . But, down trodden and oppressed, they do not seem to manifest the same class solidarity that the working class would display in similar circumstances . . . The fallen noble accepts his defeat . . . and it is rare that any other more fortunate peer would make much effort to redeem him.
>
> (R. Lacey, *Aristocrats* (1984), p. 178.)

> George VI rescued the Garter from the Prime Minister of the day, and made it 'non-political and in my gift' . . . Whom would the king, of his independent will, delight to honour? The first list of his nominations contained the obvious war leaders. There followed in 1948: the Duke of Portland, Lord Harlech, the Earl of Scarbrough, and Lord Cranworth. In 1951, there was a further batch: the Duke of Wellington, Lord Fortescue, and Lord Allendale. Who were these men? What had they done to deserve any honour, let alone the highest in the land? Did they even exist? They belonged to a world of shadows.
>
> (A. J. P. Taylor, *Essays in English History* (1976), p. 288.)

As the victory bells rang out in 1945, the Earl of Radnor remarked to his Countess that, however much there might be a brighter dawn for the lower orders, 'now our personal problems begin.'[1] And he was quite correct. The end of the war left most surviving landowners in circumstances more reduced and distressed than they had ever known; and in the austere and egalitarian world of Welfare State socialism that followed, there was a distinct feeling that their remaining economic privileges, political influence, and social status were no

longer acceptable. In fact, their most alarmist fears about the Labour government of 1945–51 proved to be exaggerated. But nevertheless, during the years since the Second World War ended, the steady and inexorable decline that had been so marked since the beginning of the twentieth century continued and even accelerated. In post-war Britain, from Attlee to Thatcher, wealth, power, and status would no longer be territorially based.

Economically, the combination of continued austerity and increased taxes meant that estates tumbled into the market in the years immediately after 1945, and that country houses, town palaces, works of art, and non-agricultural assets were destroyed or disbursed on an unprecedented scale. Some owners gave up and emigrated; some were forced to turn to the stately-homes business; the majority were obliged to earn their living. The late 1950s and early 1960s brought a brief remission, underpinned by rising land values. But the soaring costs and increased taxes levied by the end of the decade threatened to make country houses uneconomic monsters to all except the very wealthy (and therefore very lucky) few. By the 1980s, stately homes and their owners were among the most conspicuous lame ducks of Thatcherite Britain, and what remained of the old landed order had effectively ceased to be an economically definable class at all.

Politically, the post-war picture has been equally bleak, relieved only by occasional but ephemeral rays of sunshine. The Labour government of 1945 was the most radical and least landed ministry in modern British parliamentary history, and its legislation and its rhetoric emphatically reflected this. The Tory governments from 1951 to 1964 were more patrician in façade than in substance, and inept and transient Prime Ministers like Eden and Home only discredited still further the idea that the landed élite was the ruling élite. At the margins of power – in Rhodesia and in Kenya, in Northern Ireland, and in the deepest of the shires – the landowners lingered on. But even there, by the mid-1970s, their position was being fundamentally eroded. In the world of Wilson and Callaghan, Heath and Foot, public life in Britain was less aristocratic than it had been in the days of Attlee. And in the rampantly petty-bourgeois world of Thatcher, where self-made men are her ideal, the old territorial class appears – with very few exceptions – at best anachronistic and at worst plain irrelevant.

In social terms, too, the gentry and grandees have dwindled almost to invisibility. The honours system is now completely divorced from its old territorial and patrician base, and no political party – and not even a majority in the House of Lords – today defends the idea of hereditary titles. Likewise the great ornamental

positions – in the empire, the nation, and the localities – have either vanished in the aftermath of decolonization, or have largely been taken over by people of every different backgrounds, who are now deemed more appropriate. The disappearance of the great London palaces, of so many of the grandest country houses, and of the once numerous servant class, means that the labour-intensive theatricality of aristocratic life has virtually come to an end. In a hostile political and economic climate, a low-profile existence seems more prudent (and more necessary) than continued conspicuous consumption. In so far as there is a glamour group in Britain today, it is an amalgam of royalty and the media: but the old landowning class barely signifies.

In short, this chapter does not so much tie up loose ends, as follow dispersing and diminishing threads as they diverge still further and in some cases disappear altogether. There is, undeniably, still much of intrinsic interest to record. But from the broader perspective of modern British history as a whole, this is necessarily the most tangential chapter. For it is a study in increasing marginality rather than in continuing class consciousness, in subordination rather than in dominance, in fragmentation rather than in solidarity. Only in one particular collective guise do today's descendants of the once rich, well born, and powerful patricians survive in the public mind: as the self-styled and self-promoting guardians of what they like to call the national heritage.

i. Plenty and Poverty

In the early 1950s, that supposed inhabitant of cloud-cuckoo-land, P. G. Wodehouse, published a rather unusual novel entitled *Ring for Jeeves*. Bertie Wooster does not appear in it, having gone to a school designed to teach the aristocracy to fend for itself (i.e. to learn to darn socks), lest 'the social revolution should set in with greater severity.' Accordingly, Jeeves has been lent out to Lord Rowcester, the owner of a magnificent but decaying stately home. The roof leaks, the farms have been sold, and the park has been leased out to the local golf club. In a lengthy speech to an American visitor amazed at the decay of the English aristocracy, Jeeves explains the facts of life as they now apply to the old territorial nobility:

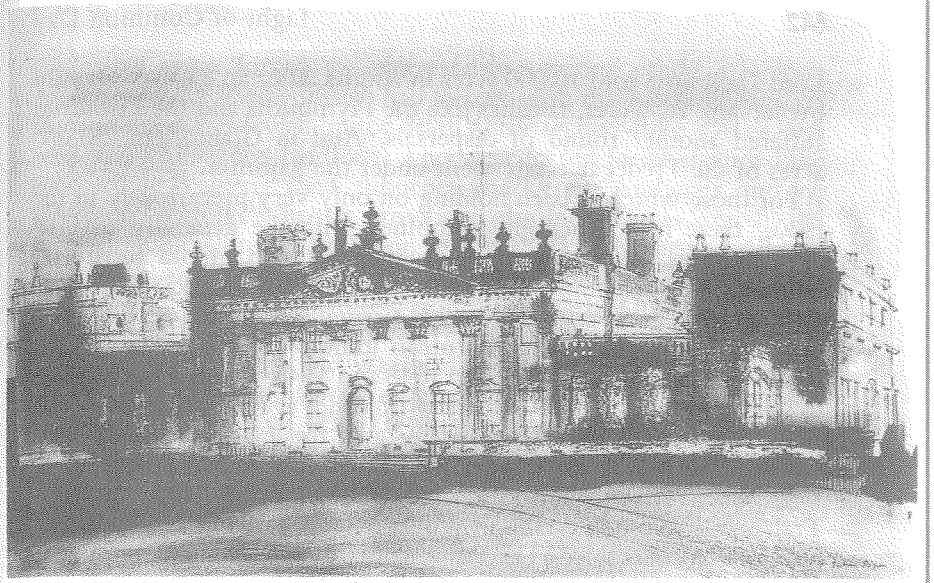
> A house such as Rowcester Abbey in these days is not an asset, sir, it is a liability . . . Socialistic legislation has sadly depleted the resources of England's hereditary aristocracy. We are living now in what is known as the Welfare State, which means – broadly speaking – that every body is completely destitute.

Only by marrying a rich American widow, and by demolishing the house and rebuilding it in the United States, is Lord Rowcester enabled to live happily ever after.[2]

As this account implies, the depredations of the Second World War persisted well into the later 1940s, when many requisitioned country houses were returned to their original owners. But they were often in a ruined state that made them virtually uninhabitable, and the compensation was usually quite inadequate for any necessary restoration work.[3] Nor did conditions improve during the next five years. The ice-cold winter of 1947 made many ostensibly 'great' houses literally unliveable in. Labour was hard to obtain, fuel was in short supply, and it was almost impossible to acquire building materials. Building licences were rigorously enforced, and were only gradually phased out in the early years of Conservative rule. Earl Peel tried to embellish and extend Hyning Hall in Lancashire, to make the house a fitting residence since he had recently been appointed the new Lord-Lieutenant. But he failed to apply for a licence, was successfully prosecuted, and obliged to resign his office. And the twelfth Duke of Bedford was fined £5,000 for carrying out his illegal scheme of truncation and remodelling at Woburn.[4]

At the same time, the future financial outlook seemed bleak in the extreme. In 1950, the value of farming land remained what it had been in 1880, and this in a world where most prices had risen dramatically. Agriculture might still be booming, fostered by more generous government support, but – as in the war – it was the farmers and the labourers, not the landlords, who benefited. New legislation concerning town and country planning further eroded the landowners' remaining autonomy over their holdings.[5] Taxes on incomes were raised to unprecedented levels to pay for the big-spending government programme. There was a capital levy in 1948. Death duties were increased to 75 per cent on estates of over one million pounds. And the period that must elapse after the estate was made over before exemption was obtained was extended from three to five years in 1946. Unless avoidance was carefully managed, no patrician family could survive such exactions unscathed. The fact that the Finance Act of 1949 gave 45 per cent abatement of duty payable on agricultural land was not, at the time, much help.[6]

The result was that in this immediate post-war period, some of the greatest names fell victim to that inexorable combination of the reaper and the chancellor.[7] The second Duke of Westminster left a fortune so vast – and so vulnerable – that the Inland Revenue set up a separate department to assess and collect the duties. The death of the seventh Viscount Portman in 1948 meant that the family faced their third major call for duties in twenty years. The Bedfords were



122. *View of Harewood*, c.1960, by John Piper.

crippled by two deaths in rapid succession: the eleventh duke in 1940; and his successor in mysterious circumstances only thirteen years later. The Derbys suffered three deaths close together: Edward Stanley in 1939, the seventeenth earl in 1948, and his other son Oliver in 1950. And the Devonshires were hit at least as hard: the ninth duke in 1938; the heir to the tenth duke in 1944; and then the tenth duke himself in 1952. Had he lived four months longer, the £2.5 million duties that were levied would again have been avoided. 'What dread score', inquired Henry Channon, 'has destiny to pay off against the Devonshires? Is this the end of Chatsworth? And of Hardwick?'[8]

It was a pertinent question, and there could only be one answer. Both the Bedfords and the Devonshires were forced to make extensive sales: Chenies and Tavistock in the one case, and large tracts of Derbyshire in the other. The Portmans – even harder hit – had to give up all of their Dorset estate. Lord Bath sold in Northamptonshire, Shropshire, and parts of Wiltshire.[9] John Wyndham disposed of all the Leconfield lands in Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Dumfries, and 20,000 acres in Cumberland and 7,000 acres in Sussex. The Earl of Harewood parted with two-thirds of his Yorkshire holdings; Lord Derby sold the Fylde estate, some of the Macclesfield forest estate, and Knowsley village. The Duke of Argyll disposed of the Island of Tiree and 28,000 acres in Kintyre. The Duke of Richmond unloaded property in Banff, and the Duke of Montrose in Arran and Stirling.

Lord Dalhousie sold 10,000 acres in Angus, after an 850-year family ownership. In Wales, families like the Plymouths and the Lisburnes suffered another round of dispersals. And in Glamorgan, 30,000 acres of the Tredegar estate went under the hammer.[10]

For those who had been holding on only very precariously in the 1930s, these new exactions, combined with the generally adverse circumstances, often led to the total extinction of old territorial holdings and the complete disappearance of some patrician families. In Wales, the Pryse estates provided a rental of £7,000 a year in 1946; but all of this was swallowed up in jointures and annuities. Two rounds of death duties, levied in 1946 and 1948, obliged the trustees to sell everything to the University of Wales at Aberystwyth.[11] The Madingley estate near Cambridge, and the Harcourt lands near Oxford, were both given over for similar educational purposes. In 1947, the Nelson family abandoned completely their house – Trafalgar – and their estates in Wiltshire, and Earl St Vincent sold all his lands in Yorkshire. The descendants of John Bateman – whose ancestor had catalogued the landed establishment in its prime – sold out completely in Essex; the Sneyd family, crippled with a succession of death duties, disappeared altogether from Staffordshire; and Lord Acton sold his estate at Aldenham in Shropshire.[12]

What did this add up to? The trends were clear, and were, essentially, an intensification of those that had been so pronounced in the aftermath of the First World War. Many small and middling families gave up completely, and even the greatest grandees were obliged to sell parts of their most cherished heartland properties. By 1950, probably one-half of the farms of England and Wales were now owner occupied – the highest percentage in modern history. In 1952, in Essex, Oxfordshire, and Shropshire, only one-third of the old territorial families survived in possession of their country seats; one-quarter were listed but had sold their estates and moved to smaller properties; and the remainder had disappeared completely.[13] As the editor of *Burke's Landed Gentry* pointed out in the preface to the 1952 edition, it was 'more and more a history book rather than a record of estates'. And the same was true of the territorial nobility. As Lord Salisbury explained in a debate in the Lords in 1951: 'There still seems to be an impression in Labour circles that all the land of England is owned by a small number of immensely rich and almost medieval territorial magnates . . . But my Lords, that conception, of course, is really long out of date.' Indeed, by 1956, only one-third of the peerage possessed country estates at all.[14]

So great were the depredations, and so depressed were the conditions, that non-agricultural assets also went under the hammer in unprecedented amounts. In London, the Bedfords, Portmans, and

Cadogans were forced to realize large sections of their famous estates, and the Westminsters had to part with the whole of Pimlico to meet the duties levied on the death of the second duke. Other, less well-known London landlords who were forced to sell included the Howard de Waldens, the Calthorpes, the Tyssen-Amhersts, and the Duke of Norfolk.[15] In the provinces, the picture was exactly the same. In Lancashire, Lord Sefton sold his Kirkby Estate and Aintree racecourse, the Salisburys sold in Liverpool, and Lord Derby sold in Ormskirk. The Butes withdrew from Cardiff, the Dudleys from the Black Country, the Marquess of Anglesey from Glossop, and Lord Crawford from Haigh and Wigan. The Earl of Jersey sold in Swansea and Port Talbot, Lord Lonsdale in Whitehaven, and Lord St Germans in Lewisham. The Devonshires never returned to Compton Place at Eastbourne, where they disposed of their holdings in the Parks and Baths Company. And at Skegness, the death of the eighth Earl of Scarbrough necessitated a further round of sales.[16]

Predictably, the few remaining great town palaces were also doomed to their final disappearance. Portman House was demolished, and Holland House became a local authority park. Of those that survived the war reasonably intact, Dudley, Spencer, Bridgewater, Wimborne, and Derby Houses were soon sold for office or other institutional uses; and Apsley House was presented to the nation by the seventh Duke of Wellington to be the national museum for his illustrious ancestor. Only Londonderry House continued as a private residence for a time, and that was on a very much reduced scale. Eventually, it was sold in the early 1960s for half a million pounds, and was immediately demolished. The only great London houses remaining are lived in by members of the royal family: Marlborough House, for Queen Mary, subsequently given to the government; Clarence House for the Queen Mother; and Buckingham Palace itself.[17] But the days when the great grandees in London lived in state equal or superior to the monarch had long since gone. As Nancy Mitford rightly noted in 1955, 'aristocracy no longer keep up any state in London, where family houses hardly exist now.'[18]

This sale and destruction of town palaces were replicated on a much larger scale by the sale and destruction of country mansions. For they were too big, too uneconomical, and often damaged beyond repair, the setting for a life and for a class now generally believed to be extinct. As Lawrence Stone rightly remarked, 'in 1945, impoverished and now socialist England found itself saddled with far more great mansions than it knew what to do with.'[19] Many of them were sold to institutional purchasers, thereby perpetuating in peacetime the uses to which the houses had been put in war. Himley Hall was bought by the Coal Board from the Earl of Dudley,

and Taplow and Elvetham Hall were bought by industrial concerns. Kimbolton was turned into a school, and Lumley Castle was converted into a hall of residence for Durham University. Hinchingbrooke was sold to Huntingdon County Council for 'scholastic purposes', Wentworth Woodhouse became a teacher-training college, and Welbeck an army training centre. And Aylesford Priory and Allington Castle were occupied by the Carmelite Order.

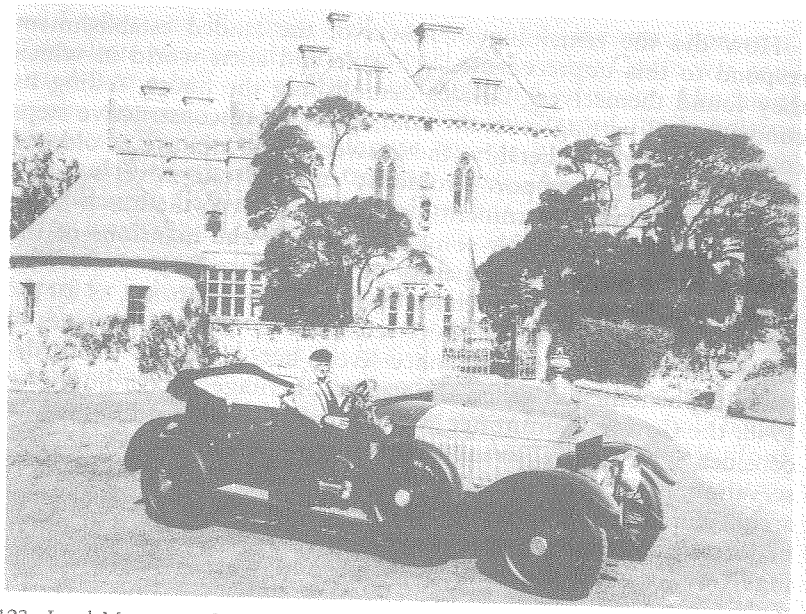
But inevitably, it was impossible to find institutional uses for many of the empty houses that remained. One or two were bought by private individuals or converted into country house hotels. But in the absence of government regulations prohibiting it, most were demolished. In some cases, demolition was only partial: at Woburn one range was destroyed; at Bowood the house was pulled down but the grand stable block retained. But in many cases, the whole house disappeared: Panshanger, Normanhurst, Lowther Castle, Rufford Abbey, and Ravensworth Castle were only the most famous victims. Between 1945 and 1955, four hundred country houses were demolished, more than at any other period of modern British history.[20] Indeed, by 1955, the peak year, they were disappearing at the rate of one every five days, and some of the greatest houses – like Eaton Hall – were yet to go. In 1951, in language much more alarmist than that which Lord Lothian had used in the 1930s, Lord Crawford lamented that 'a national tragedy, indeed a national scandal, is taking place before our eyes.' And he had good cause to know.[21]

As the great mansions were sold, demolished completely, or partially reduced in size, as some families left their ancestral homes for good, and as the great town palaces were destroyed or sold off, the result was that many aristocratic artefacts went under the hammer. The years after 1945, like those immediately before, were not a particularly good time to sell since the international art market was not yet restored: the financial system was in chaos, with widespread currency restrictions; there were fewer millionaire collectors in America willing and able to buy; and the great transatlantic museum purchasers had not yet come upon the scene. Nevertheless, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, major sellers of works of art included Ellesmere, De L'Isle, Zetland, Tollemache, Halifax, and Fitzwilliam.[22] Great libraries were also dispersed, by Howard, Crawford, Malmesbury, Bute, Derby, and Tollemache. When the Dudleys sold Himley and the Manchesters left Kimbolton, the contents of both once-great houses were auctioned. In 1951, there was a major (and very ill-advised) sale at Woburn of two hundred seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish paintings. And in 1953, the contents of Panshanger went under the hammer, in another of the many 'demolition sales' of the time.[23]

How did the remaining members of the landed establishment respond to this unprecedentedly hostile and alien world in which they found themselves? Besides demolishing the house, selling its contents, and parting with the land, what more constructive steps could they take? Predictably, the answer was a mixture of old and new means of life-support. Ironically enough, one novel solution was to turn to the government for assistance. Even the much-hated Labour administration felt some anxiety that the mansions of the mighty had become the casualties of the Welfare State. Naturally, their concern was not so much for the fate of the occupants, as for the fate of their houses, which were seen, not as derelict machines in which the upper classes had once lived, but as part of a broader cultural phenomenon called the national heritage. Accordingly, in 1948, the Gowers Committee was set up by Sir Stafford Cripps, to consider 'what general arrangements might be made for the . . . preservation, maintenance and use of houses of outstanding historical or architectural interest, which might otherwise not be preserved.' Its major recommendation was the setting up of three Historic Buildings Councils, for England, Scotland, and Wales, which were to make grants for repairs to great houses, conditional on a certain degree of public access.[24]

Here was a new measure of aristocratic indigence: a socialist administration subsidizing patrician mansions. A second innovation of the Labour government was the setting up, in 1946, of the National Land Fund, with a capital sum of £50 million. One use to which the money could be put was to compensate the Treasury if the government decided to accept land in lieu of death-duty payments. Thereafter, these provisions were extended to cover historic houses and works of art, with the result that between 1947 and 1957 the Treasury passed on twenty-six properties to the National Trust, including houses such as Penrhyn, Saltram, and Shugborough. Some, indeed, were among the greatest mansions in the land, including Hardwick, which was accepted by the Treasury in part payment after the death of the tenth Duke of Devonshire.[25] In the same way, the magnificent pictures and splendid contents of Petworth were accepted by the Treasury after the death of Lord Leconfield. In addition, many other mansions were bequeathed directly to the National Trust in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, including Tatton Park, The Vyne, Powis Castle, and Felbrigg.

These solutions to aristocratic indigence necessarily involved the abandonment of aristocratic privacy, and the opening of the house to the public – to a lesser or greater extent. Indeed, the idea of turning the family mansion itself into a money-making venture, by opening it to a mass public, was the most significant innovation in this



123. Lord Montagu of Beaulieu.

period. The pioneer was the sixth Marquess of Bath, who inherited the dilapidated, 118-roomed mansion of Longleat, and £700,000 worth of death duties in 1946.[26] He was obliged to sell off much of the land, and in April 1949 opened the house to the public as the showplace of the West Country, the first stately home to admit visitors on a regular, paying basis. Within a year, 135,000 people had paid to come to look at Lord Bath's home and heirlooms, and by the mid-fifties, the figure was topping a quarter of a million. Soon, Longleat was open every day except Christmas, and Lord Bath was employing as large a staff as his ancestors had known in the nineteenth century – albeit for rather different purposes.

The second pioneer in the stately-homes business was Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, who succeeded to his titles in 1929, while still a minor, but who inherited the house and estates only in 1951 at the age of twenty-five.[27] Although not crippled by death duties like Bath, he, too, felt that the family mansion, Palace House, was too large to maintain as a place of residence. Accordingly, he exploited his father's early interest in the horseless carriage to turn Beaulieu into a motoring museum and, in 1952 – the first year of opening – 80,000 visitors were recorded. Shortly after, the newly inherited Duke of Bedford returned to Woburn, where he found the family facing the crippling burden of double death duties. Estates were sold

in Bloomsbury and the country, and the trustees urged the new duke to abandon the struggle and give Woburn Abbey over to the National Trust. But he determined to keep the house in the family, by opening it to the public in April 1955, and promoted it with all the entrepreneurial zeal he could muster. Very soon, it was attracting 180,000 visitors a year.[28]

There were many who dismissed this idea of turning country mansions into 'a sort of funfair', as the ultimate desecration of the family home. Even in the inter-war years, there had never been anything quite like this. Occasional visitors might be tolerated out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*. But the idea of 'refloating one's fortunes on a flood of half crowns, motor-coach parties and set teas' was something altogether different. The very change in the words used signified a major transformation. A country house, sequestered and secluded, was one thing; a stately home, open to a paying public, was quite another.[29] The Duke of Bedford, in particular, was criticized for being brash, undignified, and pushy; he allowed nudists to camp in his grounds, even appeared on television, and was likened to a circus impresario. But it worked. By 1960, Woburn was visited by 431,000 people, and Beaulieu by 289,000. Blenheim, which was first opened in 1950, received its one millionth visitor six years later. And this was, for many owners, the shape of things to come: between 1950 and 1965, six hundred houses were opened, including some of the greatest in the land – Chatsworth, Houghton, Arundel, and many more.

Beyond these much-publicized innovations, the solutions resorted to by this new generation of needy notables were to do what had been done before, but to do it more intensively and more urgently. Some patricians, overwhelmed by financial difficulties, and deeply distressed by the new socialist austerity of the Welfare State, followed their forebears and emigrated, to South Africa, Kenya, and Rhodesia. Despite the murder of Lord Erroll, Happy Valley's allure remained and was, if anything, increased. One such patrician *émigré* was Lord Portsmouth.[30] He had worked hard on the Hampshire Agricultural Committee during the war, but now saw no future for his class or his country. 'All was drab, alas too drab, in England' he complained. 'The motto of the new democracy seemed to be . . . "the greatest misery to the greatest number".' In 1948, he visited Kenya, a country that he believed provided the opportunity to do something positive and constructive, and the space to re-create the old, more spacious life he had known on his family estates in his youth. Encouraged by Lord Francis Scott, he purchased 3,000 acres almost on impulse, and soon greatly extended his holdings.

Nor was Portsmouth exceptional, in attitude or action. For some

of the greatest names in the land decided that their only future lay on the periphery, in the empire. The eleventh Duke of Manchester abandoned Kimbolton for Kenya. The heir to the Dukedom of Montrose settled in Rhodesia. The Marquess of Tavistock took up fruit farming in South Africa.[31] The Duke of Grafton bought 20,000 acres in Rhodesia for one of his younger sons. And when Lord Acton sold Aldenham, he, too, went to Rhodesia. There, like many an expatriate aristocrat, he combined farming with business ventures, and amassed a clutch of directorships in packaging, banking, and insurance. In 1967, he moved to Swaziland, where he became a director of the Swaziland Building Society, and in 1971 he retired to Majorca.[32]

Others were determined to sit it out in Britain, heeding the view of the Princess Royal when Harewood was hit so hard by death duties that 'whatever happens, we musn't emigrate or desert this country, however much we are tempted.'[33] But to give effect to this stiff-upper-lipped view, alternative sources of income had to be found. As from the 1880s, directorships in the City beckoned alluringly, especially in safe companies like banks and insurance. The eighteenth Earl of Derby was a director of Martins Bank and the Royal Insurance Company.[34] The premier baronet of England, Sir Edmund Bacon, was chairman of the British Sugar Corporation and a director of Lloyds Bank. Cameron of Lochiel was chairman of the Scottish Widows Insurance Company and the Royal Bank of Scotland. Sir Cennydd Traherne was a director of the Cardiff Building Society. The Norwich Union could claim Lord Townshend and Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen. The directors of the Royal Exchange included one duke, two earls, four viscounts, and two barons. How much work these patricians did remains unclear. In most cases, it seems that they emerged from the shires for monthly meetings and then went home, while subcommittees did all the work and took most of the important decisions.[35]

As before, some aristocrats took a much more active part in the City, either out of need or inclination. Lord Balfour of Burleigh was chairman of Lloyds; Lord Harlech was chairman of the Midland and the Bank of British West Africa; and Lord Pakenham was chairman of the Anglo-Irish Bank.[36] Oliver Lyttelton, during the period of Tory opposition, and after his retirement from politics in 1955, was chairman of AEI, and held a host of other directorates. But the most striking innovation was the extent to which heads of aristocratic families launched themselves into the new world of commercial television. The Earl of Antrim was the founder chairman of Ulster Television. The Marquess Townshend held the same position with Anglia, and was reputedly responsible for the company logo, of a

knight on a horse. His lordship was keen on riding and chivalry, and thought that a knight in armour was an appropriate symbol for a once feudal and still rural region. And in Wales, the first holder of the commercial franchise was TWW, largely funded and controlled by Lord Derby, which was in turn superseded by Harlech Television, another coroneted communications company.[37]

Among the younger generation, few notables soiled their hands by actually working on the shop floor; but the range of careers now deemed acceptable had markedly widened. The heir to the Duke of Argyll studied electronics at McGill University in Canada, then worked for a brokerage firm on Wall Street and for Rank Xerox. The heir to the Duke of Richmond trained as a chartered accountant and worked for five years at Courtaulds in Coventry. Lord Harewood and Lord Drogheda went into the world of opera, and Lord Brabourne into films. The fifth Earl of Gosford became a wine merchant in New York. Lord Verulam was the general manager of Enfield Rolling Mills, and subsequently president of the London Chamber of Commerce. The young Lord Carrington, after demobilization and inheritance, became a trainee manager at de Havilland.[38] The Hon. Nicholas Ridley began as a civil engineering contractor. In every case, financial necessity was the imperative: even if many of these patricians kept their family mansions, their sources of income were becoming almost indistinguishable from the vast majority of the upper middle classes.

Underlying all these changes in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War was the inescapable fact of territorial decline. Between 1880 and 1976, even the greatest and most tenaciously surviving estates were diminished by 76 per cent in England and Wales, and by 69 per cent in Scotland (see Appendix H). Of course, sales had been occurring throughout much of that time, but the most extensive transfers of land probably occurred after 1945. Among the grandees in Scotland, Sutherland was down from 1.3 million acres to a mere 138,000. And of the great English magnates, Devonshire was reduced from 133,000 to 56,000, and Portland from 54,000 to 17,000.[39] Only very rare exceptions from among the old territorial nobility – like the Beauforts and the Westminsters – were able to enlarge their acreage. Significantly, the other most outstanding trend was the accumulation, post-Bateman, of massive holdings by the new plutocracy: the Levers, the Guinnesses, and the Cowdrays. But among the old aristocratic families, the once very broad-acred landowners were less great and less supra-national, while those of more limited acreage were even further diminished.

Yet during the period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, this considerable truncation of patrician landownership seemed almost

belied by the abrupt upturn in some territorial fortunes. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, the price of farming land began to rise, bringing to an abrupt termination the seventy-year depression in agriculture and in land prices, to which for three generations there had seemed no end. In 1871, before the beginning of the slump, farm land had been worth on average about £53 an acre, but during the worst of the inter-war depression, its selling price was at rock bottom somewhere between £23 and £28 an acre. Yet from the mid-1950s, the price began gradually and firmly to rise: to £73 an acre by 1959–60, £98 by 1961–2, and £114 by 1963–4.[40] As a result, those families who had managed to hold on to some land found themselves much better off: indeed, in terms of capital value, the loss of land through enforced sales was often more than outweighed by the increased worth of that which was left. On paper, at least, any notable with 10,000 acres was now a millionaire, while those few who had held on to greater amounts were richer than they had ever been before, notwithstanding the fact that their acres were fewer.

This dramatic increase in the capital value of agricultural land was exactly paralleled by the sudden, and quite extraordinary, increase in the worth of paintings and other *objets d'art*, as the international market was restored, and the great American galleries began to push up the prices. The most emphatic evidence of this came in 1959 when, to pay the final portion of death duties on the estate of the second duke, the Westminsters sold off some of their paintings for a record £740,000, including Rubens' *Adoration of the Magi* which alone fetched £275,000 (it had been valued at only £7,500 in 1953).[41] Thereafter, there were many noble vendors in the saleroom. In June 1960, the Berkeley Castle 168-piece silver dinner service fetched £207,000. In 1961, the Duke of Leeds sold the Goya portrait of the Duke of Wellington to the National Gallery for £140,000. Three years later, the Earl of Derby parted with Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast* for £170,000, and in 1969, Lord Fitzwilliam disposed of Stubbs' *Frieze of Broodmares* for £200,000. Even for families hard hit by death duties, the sale of an old master or two was often sufficient to meet the bill.[42]

In any case, after the clutch of forced sales in the ten years after 1945, in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Labour government's legislation, the patricians again became more expert at adjusting to the new rules of death-duty avoidance. The old estate management companies – now no longer invulnerable to taxation – were rapidly wound up, and more care was taken to make over family properties in good time: the present Duke of Richmond, for instance, did so as long ago as 1969, and the Duke of Bedford in 1974. At the same time, the 1960s saw the widespread proliferation

of elaborate discretionary trusts among landowning families, which were a much more effective means of tax avoidance.[43] So, in the case of the Westminsters, their affairs had been so carefully reordered in the aftermath of the death of the second duke that when the third, fourth, and fifth dukes died, the family holdings suffered hardly at all. As one adviser put it, 'the management of the estates will go on as before, and nothing is likely to cause any disintegration or fragmentation of the estates.'[44]

The result was that 'for the British aristocracy, the 1950s were a period of recovery such as nobody could have envisaged amidst the privations of World War II and its socialist aftermath.' Between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, country houses and country-house life revived in a manner that would have never been foreseen in the grim days of post-war austerity.[45] As Evelyn Waugh rightly remarked in his introduction to the revised (1959) version of *Brideshead*, his first edition had proved to be 'a panegyric preached over an empty coffin'. When he wrote the book, in the dark days of the 1940s, 'it was impossible to forsee the present cult of the English country house'. 'Brideshead today', he added, 'would be open to trippers, its treasures rearranged by expert hands, and the fabric better maintained than it was by Lord Marchmain.'[46] Across the country, oil-fired central heating, labour-saving gadgets, and the installation of private bathrooms meant that some of the greatest country houses were still able to function. And everywhere, there was restoration after years of neglect, rooms were redecorated, and treasures were displayed – for the family and for the public – with a sympathy and educated discernment that was often entirely new.

At the same time, there was a revival of confidence in landowning itself. Estates like Badminton, Welbeck, and Northumberland were still administered with the old patrician and paternal style.[47] The Devonshires moved back to Chatsworth and, while they were obliged to open the house to the public, they also made it the family home for the first time since before the Second World War. The Duke even took up horse-racing again, and actually indulged in art patronage in a minor but traditional sort of way – commissioning paintings by Annigoni and Lucian Freud, and in 1970 building a new conservatory. Antiquarian squires like Wyndham Ketton-Cremer and Sir Gyles Isham kept up the tradition of local patrician scholarship.[48] More expansively, the Calthorpe family in 1958 drew up a comprehensive re-development scheme for Edgbaston, which confidently looked forward to beyond the year 2000. And in 1971, the Westminsters produced their *Strategy for Mayfair and Belgravia*. As the Grosvenors' senior trustee put it: 'our ability is to look far ahead. Fifty years is nothing to us, and one hundred years is normal.'[49]

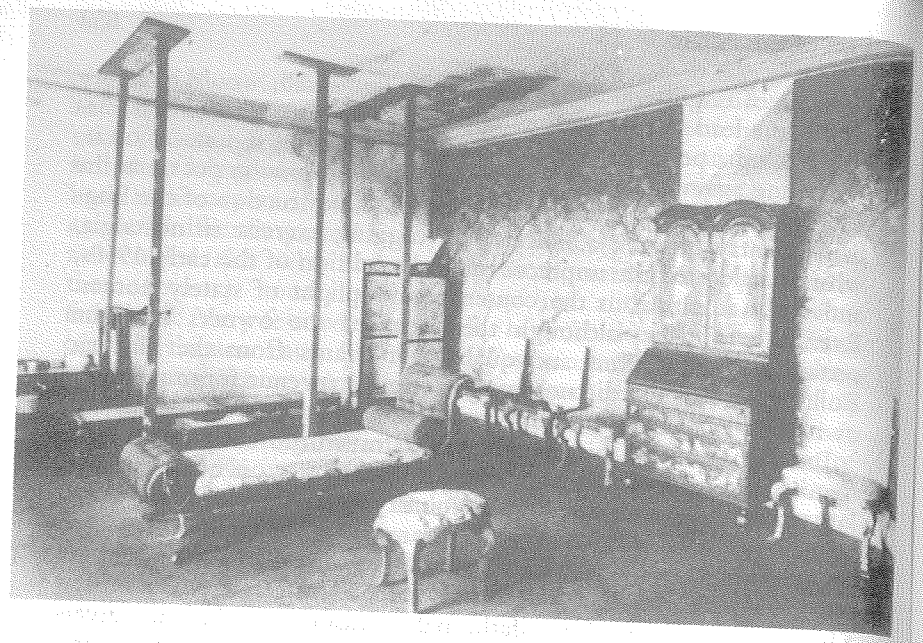
Indeed, some landowners were sufficiently confident and comfortable to embark on the construction, or reconstruction, of their country houses. The early 1950s saw both the peak of demolitions and the ending of the building licence restrictions, which made it both necessary and possible for those with the resources to build again. Unlike the period from 1900 to 1940, when it was the new, non-landed rich who had predominated, some three-quarters of these country houses were put up for authentic landowning families.[50] Very few were especially large, and only the occasional one, like the new Eaton Hall for the Westminsters, was in the modern style. The majority were neo-Georgian, and designed by architects like Clough Williams-Ellis or Claud Phillimore. Two of the latter's most important commissions were Arundel Park for the Duke of Norfolk and Knowsley for Lord Derby, both of whom moved out of the big house to live in more comfortable quarters. And in an even older tradition, some landowners actually took a hand in the designing and construction, like Roger Hesketh at Meols Hall, Lord O'Neill at Shanes Castle, and Robin Leigh-Pemberton at Torry Hill.[51]

But this Indian summer, the last, silver age of the country house, was of short duration, and soon came to an end in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The combination of world inflation and higher taxation meant that by the mid-1970s, the patricians became once again an endangered species. The energy crisis, combined with soaring domestic costs, made the maintenance and upkeep of stately homes suddenly uneconomic again: oil-fired central heating became prohibitively expensive, and the cost of labour and materials spiralled with inflation and VAT. In 1965, Capital Gains Tax was introduced, and although there were opportunities for exemption and relief on agricultural land, this meant that much of the benefit from increased property values was wiped out. In 1968–9, the time that must elapse between making over and death for estate-duty avoidance was increased from five years to seven, and discretionary trusts were made liable to taxation. Then, in 1975, Capital Transfer Tax was introduced, the most elaborate attempt yet to block the loopholes in estate-duty avoidance.[52] At the same time, the National Trust found itself increasingly stretched, with too many houses on its hands that were inadequately endowed, and became very reluctant to accept any more.

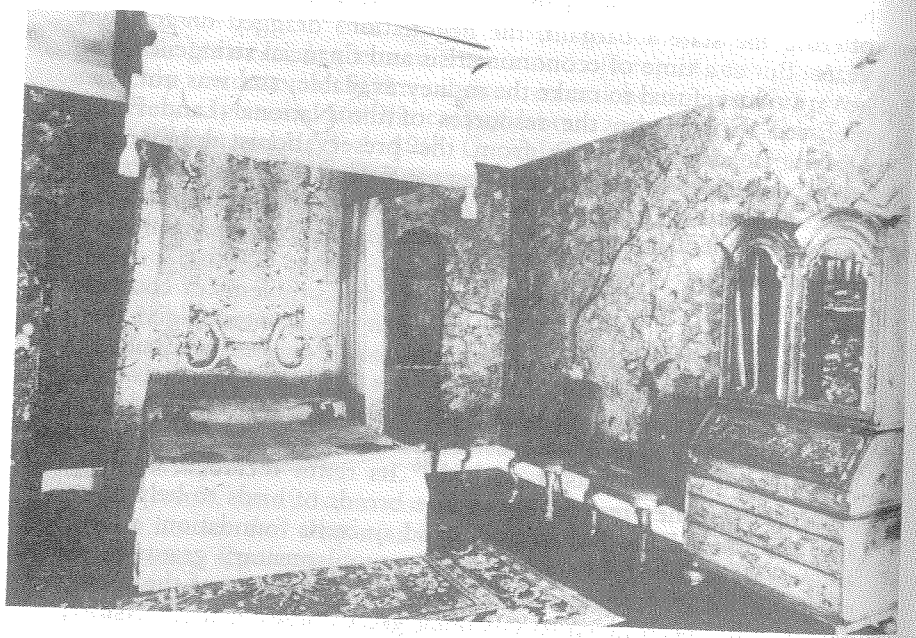
As a result, many landowners found themselves burdened with historic houses that they could no longer demolish (thanks to the conservation regulations), could not sell, could not maintain, and could not give to the state. In 1974, there was a debate in the House of Lords, in which Lord Clark predicted that 'a wealth tax on the contents of English country houses large and small, would in a very short time lead to their extinction.'[53] The Historic Houses Association got up a petition, with one and a half million signatures on it, protesting against CTT. And a massive exhibition was put on at the Victoria and Albert Museum, entitled 'The Destruction of the English Country House', a heart-string-tugging exercise in nostalgia, which catalogued the unprecedented demolition of the early 1950s, and drew attention to the contemporary plight of stately homes. Even the tourists – although they enabled the owners to claim certain tax exemptions and qualify for grants from the Historic Buildings Council – did not bring in enough revenue for most of the owners to balance their books.

But significantly, this exhibition was much more a plea for help than a reassertion of patrician hubris. 'One thing . . . is quite certain', James Lees-Milne admitted. 'The country-house way of life as some of us have known it, will never be revived.'[54] The truth of that observation was soon to be borne out in the Mentmore affair. In May 1974, the sixth Earl of Rosebery died, leaving an estate of nearly £10 million, which – for unfathomable reasons – he had not given over to his heir so as to be exempt from death duties. In February 1975, the new Lord Rosebery offered Mentmore to the nation, in lieu of £4 million worth of death duties, and also asked the government to pay him £2 million. Although Lord Rosebery claimed he was offering the state a bargain, the negotiations dragged on for two years. But at a time of economic crisis and financial stringency, the government refused to make the money available, and was not even prepared to draw on the resources of the National Land Fund. Despite a massive outcry from the preservationist lobby, and attempts to put up private funds to save the house and its collection, the contents were auctioned for £6.3 million in May 1977, and the mansion itself was later sold to become a centre of transcendental meditation.[55]

This episode well illustrated the plight and problems of country-house owners in the mid-1970s: even when they wanted to give their possessions to the government, it had become almost impossible to arrange terms. The result, in 1980, was the establishment of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, with an independent endowment, and administered by its own trustees, which was free to spend and invest its money as it wished.[56] Its remit included anything ranging from the preservation of rare breeds of birds to helping to save the *Mary Rose*. But in the period since its foundation, a large amount of its budget – augmented by supplementary grants made necessary by the increased valuations in consequence of the 'Getty Factor' – has been given to salvaging great houses: Canons Ashby,



124. (Above) Erddig, the State Bedroom in 1973. (Below) The State Bedroom in 1977.

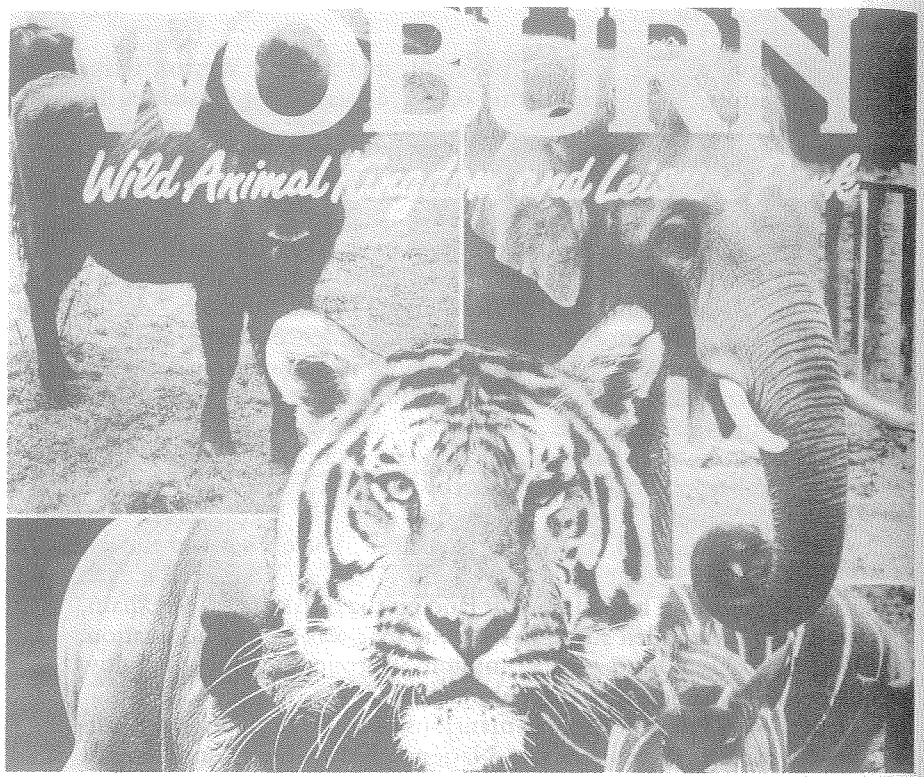


Belton, Fyvie Castle, Calke Abbey, Nostell Priory, Weston Park, and Kedleston.[57] Here, eloquently displayed, is a most illustrious list of houses, which their owners have given up, and which have been rescued by the state in the name of the national heritage. The economic weakness of the landed establishment could not be more emphatically illustrated.

Of course, some great country houses have continued to go to the National Trust because the endowments have been large enough anyway, Plas Newydd on Anglesey being a classic example.[58] In the case of Wimpole, once the magnificent residence of the Earls of Hardwicke, this was made possible because its last owner, Kipling's daughter, was able to make adequate provision from her father's royalties. In the case of Kingston Lacy, there was a massive endowment of agricultural land. But it was the example of Erddig that showed most poignantly the narrow line between poverty and riches, destruction and survival. By the 1960s, the house was in total chaos and on the brink of complete collapse. The owner was the last of the Yorkes, an eccentric recluse, who would see no one. But even in the worst times, he had bought land on the outskirts of Wrexham, and it was the sudden surge in its value that was Erddig's salvation. By selling only 60 acres for £1 million, it proved possible to endow the house and open it to the public in 1977.[59]

But these were only country mansions as relics: the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the National Trust were undertakers, embalming these once great power houses for posterity. As such, their later history forms no part of an account of the declining aristocracy, however much their disposal most emphatically does. Other families, more fortunate, have continued the recent policy of selling off the occasional work of art, to keep the tax man at bay, and in the age of the 'Getty Factor' have been able to obtain hitherto undreamed-of prices. In 1970, the Earl of Radnor parted with his Velázquez for £2.3 million to meet death duties: a predecessor had purchased it in 1811 for £151. In the same year, the Earl of Harewood sold his Titian, *Death of Actaeon*, for £1.7 million; and Lord Derby's Van Dyck, *Four Negro Heads*, realized £400,000.[60] Even more successfully, the Duke of Devonshire sold his Poussin in 1981 for £2 million to endow the Chatsworth charitable trust. Since then, he has parted with only one-twentieth of his collection of old-master prints and drawings, which, at sales held in 1984, 1985, and 1987, have realized £30 million. And the collection has 'not been trawled for the best items.'[61]

At the same time, the other trend has been – in view of the conditions governing exemption from tax and qualification for government grants – that more and more grand mansions have been



125. The cover of Woburn's 1990 promotional booklet.

opened to the public. In the mid-1970s, great families who had hitherto refused to soil their hands in the stately homes business capitulated: the Roxburghes at Floors, and the Buccleuchs at Boughton, Bowhill, and Drumlanrig. In few cases, even among the greatest stately-home tycoons, do the receipts balance the expenses: it is public relations and the tax exemptions that compel them to open their doors.[62] As a result, there has been a renewed search for gimmicks to attract a public satiated with a surfeit of stately homes. There have been rock concerts (Barry Manilow at Blenheim and Neil Diamond at Woburn), and medieval banquets even at Hatfield. The Marquess of Hertford at Ragley offers bed and breakfast at £100 a night. And the most aggressive patrician go-getters, usually in collaboration with Chipperfields' circus men, have gone in for safari parks at Longleat, Woburn, and Knowsley. To raise the necessary capital, the Earl of Derby sold his Van Dyck and his Tudor and Stuart miniatures.[63]

What, then, is the economic position of the British landed estab-

lishment today? In so far as it is possible to speak of them collectively, it must be emphasized that the old patrician class no longer forms the wealth élite of the country. Whatever the exceptions, like the Westminsters or the Devonshires or the Buccleuchs, the fact remains that, compared with the new rich, their numbers and their assets pale into relative insignificance. Only one traditional aristocrat – the Duke of Westminster – appears among the list of the ten richest men in Britain today, each of whom are worth in excess of £500 million. In the 1980s, 75 per cent of all millionaires who died were businessmen, financiers, or in the great professions: only 25 per cent were traditional landowners. Overall, it seems that wealth has not been fundamentally redistributed in Britain since the Second World War. But there has certainly been considerable change within the top category of the very rich. There is much more new super-wealth; much less old. In the era of the property tycoons of the sixties, or of men like Vestey, Maxwell, Sainsbury, and Goldsmith in the eighties, the traditional aristocracy is less significant than ever.[64]

Moreover, they are no longer the territorial élite either. In 1927, after the post-war 'revolution in landholding', some 27 per cent of the land of England was owner-occupied. After the further disruptions and sales since 1945, the figure is now thought to be nearer 65 per cent. Bearing in mind the massive increase in corporate and institutional ownership in recent years, this means that the old landowning class probably owns significantly less than one-quarter of the country.[65] Of a sample of 500 landowning families studied in 1880 and again in 1980, just under half of those who had owned 10,000 acres in 1880 still owned some land. But of those who had owned less than 10,000 acres, only 16 per cent continued as significant owner-occupiers. And of the same sample, this time of 500 houses, only 150 were now owned by the same family: 300 had changed hands, and 106 had been demolished.[66] Clearly, there are local variations: the more agricultural and less urbanized the county, the more tenacious the old families have been. And inevitably, the great families tend to have survived (albeit much reduced) more than the gentry. But this is not, overall, the picture of a thriving wealth or territorial élite.

Nevertheless, within this aggregate national picture, the economic circumstances of individual patricians vary very markedly. A small number of grandees remain quite extraordinarily rich – richer, in absolute terms, than they have ever been before. In the 1970s, Lords Fitzwilliam, Leicester, and Rosebery each left estates in the region of £10 million.[67] For all the sales of land and of old masters, families like the Devonshires, the Buccleuchs, the Northumberlands, and the Westminsters remain among the richest in the country. In 1876, at

current values, the seventh Duke of Devonshire with his 133,000 acres was worth three-quarters of a million pounds. Today, his successor – less landed with only 56,000 acres – is worth £33 million in agricultural land, excluding Chatsworth and the art collections. In terms of their agricultural properties alone, the Dukes of Westminster and of Buccleuch are each worth £100 million; and if the Westminsters' urban estates are added in, then estimates begin at £400 million, and go on well beyond one billion.[68]

Although in every case, these estates are underpinned and supported by extensive stock-exchange holdings and overseas investments they remain great landed agglomerations even so. And lower down the economic scale, there are still some country gentry who survive. In England, such families as Whitbread in Bedfordshire, Legh of High Legh, Anstruther-Gough-Calthorpe of Elvetham, L'Estrange of Hunstanton, Plowden of Plowden, and Dymoke of Scrivelsby hold on to a goodly part of their ancestral estates – all of them millionaires (at present prices) provided they own over five hundred acres.[69] Some have kept their country houses, and in a few cases do not yet open them to the public. Others have sold the family mansion, but have tenaciously held on to the estate. In Scotland, such untitled Highland families as Cameron of Lochiel, Maclean of Duart, and Macleod of Macleod continue to be great owners. And in the lowlands, the same may be said of Moncriefe of that Ilk and Fletcher of Saltoun. Decayed they undeniably are, but by no means totally extinct.[70]

But among many patrician families, there has been a merging of City and landed interests to a far greater degree than even before the Second World War. Some, although they keep up their great houses, are almost entirely reliant on outside sources of income to make ends meet. Men like Lord Polwarth and the Earl of Airlie (to say nothing of his younger brother, Sir Angus Ogilvy) are virtually full-time City businessmen, with a string of company directorships and chairmanships. Similarly, when Lord Carrington resigned from the Foreign Office in 1982, he immediately resumed his business career by becoming chairman of GEC. Likewise, Robin Leigh-Pemberton, a Kent country gentleman, began his career as a barrister, then moved into the City, eventually became chairman of the National Westminster Bank, and was subsequently appointed Governor of the Bank of England.[71] Were it not for their (much diminished) estates, their coats of arms, and their titles, these men would be indistinguishable from many other upper-middle-class professionals.

This is especially true of the many expatriate Irish peers who have been obliged to make a new life and living in mainland Britain. The eighth Earl of Antrim was chairman of Ulster Television and of the

National Trust; his son, the present earl, is a director of Ulster TV, and works in the Tate Gallery. Lord Bessborough began his career as a merchant banker, and was a director of ATV from 1955 to 1963. The twelfth Lord Farnham is chairman of Brown, Shipley, and Company, and of the Avon Rubber Company. The present Earl of Longford was chairman of the Anglo-Irish Bank (as Lord Pakenham), and subsequently of Sidgwick and Jackson, the publishers. The Earl of Drogheda, in addition to being chairman of Covent Garden, was also a director of *The Economist*, and managing director, then chairman, of the *Financial Times*. Some of these notables live in the suburbs of west London; a few have country houses, but rarely an authentic estate; none are great landowners in the conventional sense. As a recent authority rightly notes, 'The majority of expatriate Irish peers maintain a way of life no different from that of the well-to-do professional and business commuters – and indeed a high proportion of them are precisely this.'[72]

Other patricians, although not so closely involved in the City, are nevertheless also very much part of the world that we would recognize as being upper middle class and professional. Some still keep up their houses and a portion of their estates, but the majority do not. Lord Brabourne makes films. Lord Lichfield is a photographer. Viscount Chilston is a film producer for the Central Office of Information. The Marquess of Queensberry is a professor of ceramics at the Royal College of Art. The Duke of Leinster runs a flying school, and his heir, the Marquess of Kildare, is a landscape gardener. The Earl of Pembroke has made a soft-porn film and was the director of 'By the Sword Divided'. Lord Dunboyne is a county-court judge. The Earl of Kintore is a mining engineer. Both Lord Gowrie and Lord Westmorland work for Sothebys. Lord Normanton has appeared in advertisements for Burberry. Lord Fermoy is a bookbinder.[73] As such, these peers are virtually indistinguishable from thousands of other members of the upper middle class. Moreover, they are not younger sons forced to earn a living: they are the heads of once great territorial families, who have now been obliged to join the salariat.

What of the expatriates? Many of their descendants have returned home, deciding that even Thatcherite Britain is preferable to the former colonies where the white man is no longer in charge: the successors of Lord Erroll, Lord Carbery, and Sir Delves Broughton have left Happy Valley, and work for their livings in England. The present Duke of Manchester, having been an alligator hunter in Australia, is a business consultant in Bedford.[74] But many are still abroad, like Lord Graham and Lord Winchester in Rhodesia, and Lady Delamere and Juanita Carberry in Kenya. Jessica Mitford still

lives in California, and Lady Mosley in France. Lord Bridport resides in Sicily, Lord Egmont in Alberta, and the Marquess of Ormonde in the United States. When Lord Warwick decided to sell his castle, he himself left for New York, Paris, and the West Indies; the dowager Countess lives in Rome; and the heir, Lord Brooke, resides in Australia. So does the sixth Earl of Stradbroke, who is a sheep farmer.[75] And there is also a new generation of tax exiles – men like Lord Clifford of Chudleigh, who restored his house, passed it on to his heir, and lives in Jersey to avoid the death duties.

The final group are those déclassés who in 1984 were christened the *nouveaux pauvres*.[76] The ninth Earl of Buckinghamshire, who died in 1983, ended his career as a municipal gardener in Southend. The Earl of Munster had to be carried to the Lords to get his attendance allowance until the day of his death, since it was his only source of income, as he had been too poor to pay his national insurance. Earl Nelson is a police constable. The Countess of Mar has been a saleswoman for British Telecom. Lord Simon Conyngham is an assistant in a delicatessen. Lord Teviot has been a bus conductor. Lord Kingsale, the premier baron of Ireland, is a silage-pit builder in the west country, having previously been a bingo caller in Stourbridge, a lorry driver, and a safari keeper at Woburn. Lord Grey—the direct descendant of the Reform Act Prime Minister and the Governor-General of Canada—lives on a house boat and has been the director of a chain of sex shops.

But perhaps the non-royal dukes provide the most revealing insight into the economic condition of the aristocracy today. The majority of them still own over 10,000 acres. Britain's richest man, and Britain's most broad-acred man, are both dukes. But on the other hand, Bedford, St Albans, and Montrose are all tax exiles. Portland, St Albans, and Manchester do not own an acre of their ancestral lands. Sutherland is no longer a force in his titular county. Newcastle was 'the first duke ever to live in a main residence identified by a number.' Most people do not know that the Duke of Somerset exists at all. In the Dukeries itself, Thoresby is demolished, Leeds is extinct, Portland is gone, and Norfolk has departed to Sussex. Even one of the richest and the grandest, the Duke of Devonshire, is highly pessimistic about the future: 'Two generations more I give it. Unless matters change soon, we will see, not just the splitting up of larger estates into smaller ones, but the total extinction of any sizeable holdings whatsoever. The day of the big estate – even of the fairly big estate – is nearly over.'[77]

ii. Elegant Anachronisms

One of the central characters in Jeffrey Archer's novel, *First Among Equals*, is the Hon. Charles Gurney Seymour, second son of the fourteenth Earl of Bridgewater, who owns 22,000 acres in Somerset, a Scottish castle, extensive urban property in Leeds, a magnificent collection of family paintings, and a merchant bank in the City.[78] Seymour, in turn, becomes a Conservative MP at thirty-three, holds a succession of senior posts in government, is for a time chairman of the family bank, and is seen as a strong candidate for the leadership of the party in the aftermath of Mrs Thatcher. 'His patrician background', another MP remarks, 'still counts for something with the Tories.' Here, written as recently as 1984, is a traditional view of the Tory party and of the aristocracy's special and superior place within it. Yet in the end, it all comes to nothing, as Seymour is beaten for the leadership by a middle-class provincial, thereupon renounces political ambition and parliamentary infighting, and accepts instead the dignified but detached job of Speaker of the House of Commons.

As this story suggests, to write about patrician political power in the aftermath of the Second World War is very largely to dwell on the fringes and the margins of government, as the landed and titled presence in public life has, inexorably, sunk lower and lower. By 1945, it was self-evident that broad acres by themselves no longer conferred either the right or the opportunity to wield political power. Even if they had the inclination, most gentry and grandees no longer had the leisure for public life: mere survival had itself become a full-time occupation. And the general election of that year was the most damaging for the old territorial classes since the Liberal landslide of 1906. In Anthony Sampson's words, it 'swept away shoals of squires, and brought a new catch of middle class politicians, with political expertise but without landed connections.'[79] Oliver Lyttelton, on seeing the new House of Commons, 'feared for his country.' And Ian Anstruther was equally pessimistic: 'for the first time in its history', he opined in 1947, 'the upper classes are not wanted.'[80]

In more mundane terms, this meant that the aristocratic element in the Commons was the smallest in modern times. Sir Archibald Sinclair was defeated in the family county of Caithness, the Hon. John Grimston was rejected at St Albans, Sir Richard Acland lost in Devon, and Lord Dunglass was turned out in Lanark. Of course, there were still a few patricians returned – some old hands and others new recruits. Lord Willoughby d'Eresby kept his seat for Rutland, Lord William Scott held on to Roxburgh and Selkirk, and Lord Hinchingbrooke retained South Dorset. The younger son of the Earl