DAVID SPRING

1 | Landed Elites Compared

Apart from what has been written on the English landed elite, not a great deal has been written on the history of European landed elites in the nineteenth century. Still less has been written in a comparative vein. There is nothing for the nineteenth century comparable to the series of essays on the eighteenth-century aristocracies edited by Albert Goodwin.¹ There is, of course, Barrington Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, a remarkable and pertinent work, but even this does not dwell much on the nineteenth century.²

It was timely therefore that the Schouler Lectures at The Johns Hopkins University in 1974 should have taken as their topic the history of European landed elites in the nineteenth century. Specialists, each well known in his field, lectured in turn on the English, Prussian, Russian, Spanish, and French landed elites. Each lecturer was asked to address himself to the problem of how his particular landed elite coped with the difficulties of the nineteenth century; how it accommodated itself to the aspirations of new elites; how, in short, it managed to survive as well or as badly as it did. As might be expected, the lecturers differed in their preoccupations—one being an economic historian, for example, another a political historian. The lectures therefore differed in their emphasis. Nonetheless, each provided an enlightening account of landed vicissitudes, and together they marked an advance in the study of European landed elites. In this volume the lectures are made available to a wider audience. Since the lecturers were not asked to deal in systematic comparisons, comparing the landed elites has fallen to my lot in this introduction.

Historians sometimes show a fondness for an ambitious sort of comparative history—one that is drastically sociological and that strenuously explains with the aid of typologies, schedules of fundamental causes, and high-level generalizations. It is as well to be clear at the outset that I do not aspire to this. There is a more modest sort of
comparative history, one that explains by dwelling on differences. It seeks, as Marc Bloch put it, “to analyse and isolate the ‘originality’ of different societies.” It is this sort of comparative history that I have in mind here. Since I know most about the English landed elite I will inevitably come down most heavily on its peculiarities. Original research of a serious sort on Continental landed elites is of course beyond me. If no more comes, however, of this essay in comparative history than asking questions and finding where we are ignorant, it should be of use.

This introduction will fall into two main parts. The first, largely economic and legal, will discuss several fundamental matters: the pattern of landownership, inheritance laws and customs, habits of residence, and estate management. The second part will discuss political power and collective mentality.

I

Useful discussion of patterns of landownership obviously requires statistical information. This is not, however, always easily come by, and sometimes even when it is plentiful it does not lend itself to enlightening comparisons. Nineteenth-century Spain, for example, produced few landed statistics of any sort. Nineteenth-century France, usually prolific in the production of statistics, supplied much on agricultural subjects but almost nothing on the subject of landownership. Nineteenth-century Prussia was more forthcoming about its landowners, but its statistics have their limitations and can mislead the unwary, as indeed can the French. In short, although rightly given large importance in recent years, quantification has its frustrations, which a comparative context renders all the more severe. Nevertheless, enough statistics are available to let some light into a hitherto obscure subject.

England possesses what is the most thorough survey in the nineteenth century of a nation’s landowning structure. Over the period 1874–6 the government published, in what is generally known as the New Domesday Book, the results of a special census identifying landowners and indicating the location and size of their estates. Before 1874 critics of the English estate system had charged that there were no more than 30,000 owners. Although the New Domesday Book turned up about a million, it also revealed that about 80 percent of the land of the United Kingdom was owned by some 7,000 persons.

For England (as distinct from the United Kingdom), the New Domesday Book showed that 25 percent of the land was in the hands
of 363 landowners, usually titled, who held estates of 10,000 acres and more. Another 30 percent was in the hands of 3,000 owners, usually untitled gentry, who held estates ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 acres. In nineteenth-century England something like 1,000 acres was the minimum estate size for members of the landed elite. Altogether then, the English landed elite owned at least 55 percent of English land. Owners of estates from 300 to 1,000 acres numbered about 10,000 and held about 14 percent, and those owning estates of 100 to 300 acres held about 12 percent. Public bodies, that is, the crown, church, government departments, and educational institutions, owned a mere 3 percent of English land.

Dr Zeldin suggests that French landed estates were smaller on the whole than English. He points out that France had no leviathan like the 80,000-acre duke of Bedford and that even estates of 10,000 acres were remarkable. He also points out that French official statistics have little to say on the subject of landownership: they count not owners but what the enquêté agricole of 1882 called exploitations, that is to say, farming units. Some students of the subject—mistaking these farming units for ownership units and convinced that the French landed elite was a poor thing—have leapt on the official statistic for 1882 of 921 exploitations above 1,000 acres to prove their point. In effect they would have it that although England was about one-quarter the size of France it could boast of 3,360 landowners with estates over 1,000 acres owning together 55 percent of the land, whereas France had only 921 owners of this size owning 1 percent of French land. The French landed elite may have been a poor thing, but it was not this poor.

Is there anything to be said on this matter that is at once precise and reliable? If we assume that the French landed elite was more or less equivalent in the eighteenth century to the French nobility, then we may use for a start Pierre Goubert’s recent assessment that the pre-revolutionary nobility owned 25 percent of the land of France. Authorities, to be sure, have disagreed about what happened to French estates during the Revolution, but not, it would seem, substantially. In the nineteenth century the agronomist Lavergne argued, somewhat arbitrarily, that over the long run the landed elite lost very little. A modern historian, after careful research, has concluded that in the Toulouse region noble estates diminished in size about 20 percent. If the Toulouse figure is representative, then the Revolution was not of much consequence: holding about 25 percent in the eighteenth century, the landed elite in the early nineteenth century held about 20 percent of the land of France.

This not too unreliable estimate is to be set against the solid 55
percent held by the English landed elite. The latter figure would rise to 69 percent if elite status in England were attached to estates from 300 to 1,000 acres as was the case in France and elsewhere on the Continent. All this, of course, tells us nothing about the number of French landowners or about the range in size of their estates. As noted earlier, however, large French estates were not as conspicuous as the English—an impression shared by that inveterate worshipper of aristocracies, Benjamin Disraeli, who chose to scorn the French: “Where are their territories? [he sneered] . . . Henry Hope and de Rothschild could buy them all.”

In at least one important respect—in the proportion of the national territory owned—the pattern of Prussian landownership was more like the English than the French. Prussian landowners with estates of 375 acres and more—which Prussian statisticians in the 1850s defined as large estates and which contemporaries regarded as elite estates—numbered about 15,000, in a country that was about twice the size of England. In aggregate these Prussian landowners held about 40 percent of the land of Prussia in 1858, a proportion that increased in prime Junker provinces such as Pomerania and Posen to 62 percent and 57 percent respectively. Although it does not seem possible to be precise about the number of estates over 10,000 acres, evidence suggests that they were less numerous than English estates of that size. In short, the Prussian landed elite was a more homogeneous body than the English.

Prussian statistics, like the French, need a word of caution. They provide certain figures on what are called Rittergüter, that is, “privileged” estates, or manorial jurisdictions. These figures show that among some 12,000 Rittergüter from 1835 to 1864 there were 14,400 sales, 1,300 foreclosures, and 7,900 hereditary transmissions. Historians considering these figures have said that they show “a two-hundred percent turnover in the ownership of some 12,000 large estates in the eastern provinces,” and that each estate “changed hands on average more than twice (2.14 times) during these thirty years.” These are misleading statements if, as would seem to be their purport, they are intended to suggest an unusual measure of social mobility, to indicate a marked weakening of traditional landed power in Prussia. First, they include hereditary transmissions with sales; but hereditary transmissions are logically to be contrasted with sales, not lumped with them. Moreover, even if sales are considered separately, what is implied is uncertain. The figures tell nothing about the nature of the sales. How many of them, for example, were sales from small to large landowners, that is, were transfers within the landowning class? Finally, while the
figures do show what at first sight seems a high ratio of sales to hereditary transmissions, there is no certainty even of this. *Rittergütter* were small estates, many of them very small: of the 12,000, more than 7,000 were 100 to 400 acres in size. Small estates in all land markets, even aristocratic ones, tend to change hands with some frequency without seriously altering the balance of traditional landed power. In short, to use *Rittergütter* statistics to suggest a large-scale turnover in the ownership of Prussian estates is a dubious enterprise.

When asked in the 1860s to report to his government on the subject of Spanish landownership, the First Secretary of the British legation in Madrid threw up his hands in despair: there was, he wrote, an “absence of printed statistics and immense difficulty of procuring any information which is not purely local.” This was not an example of bureaucratic indolence, but was the simple truth. The First Secretary would, moreover, have had to wait a long time—until well into the twentieth century—for the supply of Spanish statistics to improve. The following statistics are thus not directly relevant to Spanish landholding in the nineteenth century, but they may suggest a rough order of magnitude. In a national territory much like that of France in size, or about four times that of England, large estates (“large” meaning above 250 acres) numbered about 50,000 and accounted for 52 percent of Spanish land. More than half of these estates were in southern Spain, the home of the Spanish *latifundium*. Great estates (those over 12,500 acres) numbered 344.

Professor Blum’s table on Russian landholding provides much interesting information. Nobility went cheaply in Russia: it was a personal status, so to speak, and often had little to do with the possession of land. In 1877 some 55,000 Russian nobles each owned less than 100 desiatins of land (270 acres), the amount considered necessary to landed status. Many nobles of course did possess landed status—about 57,000 of them. Of this number, some 44,000 held estates between 100 and 1,000 desiatins, and some 13,000 held estates over 1,000 desiatins. About 150 nobles owned estates over 135,000 acres. Some in the last group owned vast principalities. The Sheremetev family, probably the greatest of Russian landowners, at the end of the eighteenth century owned almost 3 million acres, which a half century later had fallen to a mere 2 million.

These huge figures tend to make the mind boggle; but put in a comparative perspective, they are much less impressive. European Russia was a huge area, roughly 1,200 million acres, or about ten times the size of France. Russian noble landowners owned altogether in 1877 about 177 million acres, or something like 14 percent of the
territory of European Russia. This would put the Russian elite, measured in terms of its ownership of national territory, in the same class as the French elite. The Russian elite owed its relatively weak position to two facts: first, the Russian peasantry held 116 million desiatins of European Russia as compared to the elite’s 73 million; and second, the state towered over both the peasantry and the nobility, owning 166 million desiatins. There was nothing in the West comparable to the Russian state’s vast preponderance in Russian land-ownership.

To sum up: no Continental landed elite in the nineteenth century owned so large a part of its nation’s territory as did the English. The Spanish landed elite, for whom we have only twentieth-century statistics, was possibly its closest rival. Next came the Prussian, with the French and Russian lagging far behind. Not only did the English landed elite own a major part of the land of England but it also had no competitors in the countryside. No land-hungry peasantry faced it, as was the case in France, Spain, and Russia, nor did a land-wealthy State tower over it, as was the case in Russia. If the undisputed possession of much land was a measure of power, the English landed elite was indeed powerful.

Inheritance laws and customs also varied. Each country had developed some form of entail, that primal aristocratic device for preserving estates intact from generation to generation. In Prussia and Russia, as in prerevolutionary France, there was the fideicommissum; in post-revolutionary France there was the majorat; in Spain, the mayorazgo; and in England, the strict family settlement. Entails, however, were to have different histories from country to country in the nineteenth century, largely as a result of modern economic forces and antiaristocratic sentiment.

In England landowners possessed in the strict family settlement a unique form of entail, and one that was to continue in its essentials unchanged for nearly all the century. It was not a true entail, that is, it was not perpetual, for perpetuities were outlawed in England before the end of the fifteenth century. Settlement was all the better for that. It was a limited entail that struck a nice balance between mortmain and free alienation. It managed, as so many things English seem to have done, to get the best of two worlds. On the one hand, it passed estates intact—except for relatively small mortgages for younger children’s portions—from father to eldest son generation after generation.
Each possessed the estate only as a tenant for life and was therefore incapable of selling it or dealing with it according to whim. On the other hand, strict family settlements were to a degree flexible. Not being perpetual, they required renegotiation from time to time, usually each generation between father and son. This flexibility was increased in the nineteenth century both by private custom and by statute law so that estate development might not be frustrated by legal rigidities. Most landowners in England practised settlement, and the amount of English land in settlement was high. Estimates vary, but an authoritative one is that settlement covered 50 percent of English land.

English landowners were blessed not only in the strict family settlement but also in other provisions of the law. Where a landowner held land absolutely—either through purchase or because part of his estate was out of settlement or through the accidents inescapable in a limited form of entail—he was free to will it as he chose. He was never limited by rules requiring him to divide his property. He could thus prefer his eldest son to any degree. Should he die intestate—though this was unlikely—aristocratic principles prevailed. The law divided his personal property among his children, but it gave his land wholly to his eldest son.

In France in the nineteenth century the laws were not conducive to the preservation of estates. Even before the Revolution, it is worth mentioning, French landowners lived in a less congenial legal atmosphere than did their English counterparts. France, unlike England, had to bear in mind the landed interests of a numerous peasantry. Accordingly, the inheritance laws of the ancien régime seemed, by English ideas, to be at cross-purposes. On the one hand, French law did not object to perpetuities, and perpetual entails were legal. On the other hand, the law showed a disposition to divide property—including landed property—among children. This disposition varied in strength according to the social class of the owner, but it was never absent. Thus upon intestacy, which was normal to peasants, Roman law divided property equally among children; so too did the customary laws of many provinces. Even in testamentary dispositions division among children was required, although by no means equal division. The testator could freely dispose of anywhere from three-quarters to one-half of his property, and the aspiring could therefore favor their eldest sons. On noble estates primogeniture and entail prevailed. It was, however, a limited primogeniture, the law guaranteeing a portion—usually one-third—to the younger children. How this all worked out on prerevolutionary landed estates we do not know.
with any certainty. The evidence we have suggests, what would seem reasonable, that French landowners had less of their land in entail and made larger provisions for younger children than did English landowners.\textsuperscript{28}

The Revolution, of course, put an end to both primogeniture and entail. Moreover, under the Convention all testamentary freedom disappeared. Compulsory equal division became the rule. The Napoleonic Civil Code soon moderated this rule, allowing the favoring of one child to a limited extent. Where there were four children, for example, one might receive two-fifths of the estate.\textsuperscript{29} In sum, however, fragmentation came in the nineteenth century to haunt the French landed estate. It did so even though Napoleon in 1808, in an effort to found a new nobility for his new throne, reinstituted entail in the form of the majorat. In theory perpetual, majorats in fact were ephemeral. Since the founder of a majorat had still to make provision for his younger children in accordance with the inheritance law, majorats tended to be small.\textsuperscript{30} They were also few. Only 440 were created before the Revolution of 1830.\textsuperscript{31} Five years later further creations were forbidden, and by 1849 those already established were practically abolished.\textsuperscript{32}

Spanish law in the nineteenth century followed a course generally similar to that of France. Entails were abolished and compulsory division became the rule of inheritance. Accordingly Spanish landowners like the French faced the problem of fragmentation. There were, however, differences between the two countries that go some way to explaining the greater success of the Spanish in overcoming it. First, entails existed longer in Spain, being abolished in 1836. Second, the Spanish law compelling the division of property allowed for the greater favoring of one child. One child in a family of four might receive three-quarters of the property.\textsuperscript{33} Finally, it is arguable, as Professor Herr does in his paper, that Spanish landowners augmented their estates upon the abolition of entail through buying church lands, for these were not only disentailed but forcibly sold. Lay landowners would thus have counteracted for a while the tendency to fragmentation which the disentail of their own lands involved.

Prussia, like England, continued to maintain entail in the nineteenth century. It is tempting therefore to compare the \textit{fideicommissum} with the strict family settlement. Conspicuously the \textit{fideicommissum} was a more rigorous device. Like other Continental entails it was a perpetual entail, to be altered only by appeal to the crown or the courts. It was therefore a more certain preserver of landed estates. Nevertheless it was less popular than the strict family settlement. The \textit{fideicommissum}
covered about 5 percent of the land of Prussia in the 1850s. In a Junker province like Pomerania it covered about 15 percent.\textsuperscript{34} The comparable figure for England, as we have seen, is 50 percent. These figures are all rough. Moreover they may not be strictly comparable. Any landowner in England could create an entail. A Prussian landowner required the sanction of the state. It is likely, nevertheless, that the figures point to a real difference in the popularity of entail in two countries where it remained available.

The Russian story is singular. Peter I had worried about land fragmentation and had legislated for impartibility, at least upon death. Landowners had objected and they had prevailed. Later tsars licensed a few entail for particular landowners. In 1845 a statute allowed entail for a limited class of landowners. Little Russian land was ever in entail—in 1914 far under one percent.\textsuperscript{35} Russian landowners freely divided their estates in fee among their children male and female. The Russian novel provides examples of this. Thus in \textit{Anna Karenina} Vronsky shared the family estate with his elder brother, and the dowry of the Princess Oblonsky comprised a country estate and a piece of forest. Consequently, as Russian historians point out, Russian estates tended to wander and to disintegrate.\textsuperscript{36}

Two features stand out in the foregoing accounts and require discussion. The first is the nonemergence—practically speaking—of entail in Russia. Richard Pipes has recently argued that Russian landowners were averse to entail because their younger sons, if stripped of family property, had no source of income: “they were worse off than a peasant expelled from the commune.”\textsuperscript{37} There is no doubt that Russia lacked the rich commercial and professional life that often provided for the sons of the English landed elite. Even the Russian Orthodox Church, unlike the Church of England, failed to supply respectable employment for younger sons.\textsuperscript{38} On the other hand, Russian sons found employment in the army and the bureaucracy, and for all we know these occupations may have compensated for a backward commercial life. Even if they did not, there is cause to be skeptical of Pipes’s argument. After all, entail emerged in feudal Europe, where commerce was scarcely more flourishing than in nineteenth-century Russia. It would therefore seem that Russia’s idiosyncrasy must be explained in other ways.

Not in the short supply of jobs for younger sons but in the political role of the Russian landed elite. As Professor Blum makes clear, the Russian was essentially a service nobility, and its real title to social eminence came from state service rather than land. Unlike the English landed elite, the Russian did not define itself in opposition to central
authority. On the contrary, it acquiesced in that authority and was always completely dependent on it. It had thus early learned to be casual about its estates and their continuity, finding replenishment either through free gift or through cheap purchase from the land-wealthy state. It found little reason for the self-discipline that the English landed elite, much less sustained by the central authority, had early found necessary.

The second feature requiring discussion is the decline of entail in the Continental countries where it had earlier flourished. In France, and then in Spain, entail was abolished by law. In Prussia, where it remained legal, it was little used. Prussian landowners in the nineteenth century held apparently that entails cost more than they were worth. While they guaranteed estate succession, they came ever more often to hinder the reasonable land transactions that agricultural and industrial improvement demanded. Significantly, Spanish landowners cheerfully accepted the abolition of the mayorazgo recognizing “that its effect would be to increase the value of their estates which would enter the ordinary commercial market”; and French landowners proved cool when Charles X attempted in 1826 to revive prerevolutionary entails. Holding estates in fee involves risk for aristocracy—that was the raison d’être of entail—but safety from risk, it seems, could be bought too dear. Perhaps this indicates the “embourgeoisement” of the aristocracy. On the other hand, perhaps it indicates aristocratic self-confidence, a trust that spirit and habit would suffice to preserve estates.

Agricultural and industrial development clearly faced English landowners quite as much as Continental ones, but because English entail differed from Continental varieties in not being perpetual, it proved adaptable to the demands put upon it. The regular necessity for each father and son to renegotiate the family settlement led to the appearance of management provisions in settlements. As particular provisions became common, Parliament proceeded to make them universal by statute. By this means and others, English landowners managed, as the Economist put it, “to engraft rational progress on quasi-feudal tenures.” Accordingly, the strict family settlement proved the only useful legal device for preserving aristocratic estates in the nineteenth century.

This brings us to the habits of residence among the elites. It needs to be said at the start that habits of residence are not the same in all
sections of an elite. Wealthy families may have different habits from the less wealthy. Historians have often neglected this distinction, and have spoken as if the members of an elite all lived alike. Poorer landowners in all elites moved mainly in the small world of rural neighborhood, bound to the soil almost as much as their tenants or their peasants. Only with the coming of the railways did the habits of such landowners begin to change.

Having said this, we may venture less incautiously on a brief account of varying residential habits. Lewis Namier has said that English landowners were “amphibious.” By this he meant that they spent several months of the year in London—the so-called season—for a mixture of social and political reasons. He meant further that they brought to their rural existence an urban sophistication. All this is true: the English elite did live happily in two worlds, more successfully amphibious than any other landed elite. Nevertheless English landowners were at heart land animals. They spent the greater part of the year in the countryside. It was there that they built their principal houses; there that they kept their libraries and art collections; there that they laid out their gardens and parks, those visible symbols of the secret life of their imagination; and there that they indulged their obsession with killing game.

No other landed elite, with the exception of the Prussian, was as much resident upon its estates. The great Spanish landowners did not live in the countryside at all—“they would have found English countryhouse life inconceivable.” The French landed elite, who—at the upper levels at least—had been absentees in the eighteenth century, took to a sort of vie de château in the nineteenth century. How deeply rooted this was is doubtful. Nassau Senior, a close friend of Tocqueville and a visitor to his French country house, sensed there a sort of isolation, a lack of what the novelist Jane Austen called “neighborhood”—that is, an intimate community of neighboring landed families who frequently dined and danced and hunted together, the sort of community that lengthy residence would nurture. “Madame Anisson,” Senior reported, “who has lived in English countryhouses in what are called good social neighborhoods, wondered at our liking such a life.”

Perhaps no other landed elite was so thoroughly detached from local roots as was the Russian. Its great owners rarely visited their estates, and its middling ones visited theirs only in the summer. In Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, the families of the Levins and the Shterbatskys are described as “old noble Moscow families.” How odd it would seem to call great English families like the Cavendishes and the Greys “old
London families”. This detachment from the land is made explicit by one of the principal characters in the novel, Konstantin Levin. Levin’s aim in life is to set himself up as a resident country gentleman in the English style. He is looked upon as an oddity, a misfit, even by himself. “He (he knew very well how he must appear to others) was a country gentleman, occupied in breeding cattle, shooting game, and building barns; in other words, a fellow of no ability, who had not turned out well, and who was doing just what, according to the ideas of the world, is done by people fit for nothing else.”

Finally, there is the matter of estate management. In the present state of research, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say very much about this subject for any elite but the English. In what ways landowners contributed to the making of estate policy, what sort of men they employed as agents, the machinery of estate management—much is known about these things in England. In the absence of such information for the Continental elites, the most that can be done here is to suggest some large differences in the sort of estate business that the several elites dealt in.

In agricultural business, a crucial difference lay in the persistence on the Continent of a large mass of small and backward farms, if not owned then cultivated by peasants or serfs. The English landed elite had early gone far in removing these inefficient cultivators and had put in their place a substantial, businesslike tenantry and a landless proletariat working for wages. This meant that English landowners from the eighteenth century onwards were disposed to promote productive techniques and estate improvements. The Prussian landed elite attained this disposition, but only during the first half of the nineteenth century in the course of emancipating its peasants. Prussian emancipation benefited the landed elite much more than the peasants. Enriched by two million acres of agricultural land previously owned by the peasants, Prussian landowners became rural entrepreneurs cultivating their estates directly, aided only by a rural proletariat recruited from the ranks of the peasantry. Neither the Russian nor the French nor the Spanish landed elites, however, ever managed to free themselves of the peasant problem. The Russian emancipation of 1861 brought neither land nor the spirit of enterprise to Russian landowners. In France and Spain, peasant farming remained a major force in the countryside, although during the second half of the nineteenth century it became itself subject to currents of technological change.
In the nonagricultural business of landed elites, probably the English went furthest in undertaking a wide variety of enterprise. If there were minerals under the land or a town site to develop, the English landowner rented his land to a mining operator or to a house builder. Sometimes, as did great owners like the Lambtons or the Wards, he mined his own coal and built forges and laid out canals and railways. Continental landed elites, to be sure, were familiar with nonagricultural business. The French had known it under Louis XVI and knew it to a larger extent in the nineteenth century. They could then boast of, among others, a Comte Benoit d’Azy: agricultural improver, organizer of banks and railways, and leading ironmaster. The Prussians had their Silesian coal-mining and iron-making families. Bismarck built lumber mills on his Varzin estate to exploit his extensive woodlands, and Bethmann Hollweg did very well out of brick making, no doubt to supply the needs of Berlin’s remarkable growth. Some of the great Russian landowners refined sugar, or made coarse woolen cloth in estate factories, or set up mining and metallurgical enterprises. However, if it were possible to calculate the extent of nonagricultural business, it is likely that the English landed elite would be found outrunning Continental elites in raising (or helping to raise) such important crops as coal or urban houses. After all, the Industrial Revolution was an English invention, and English landowners readily lent themselves to its promotion. It was no accident that great English landowners like the Leveson Gowers and the Fitzwilliams took a leading part in the economic development of such nurseries of the Industrial Revolution as southeast Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. English profits were large and tempting; English aristocratic aversions to trade were weaker than the Continental; and English land law put fewer obstacles in the way of landowners’ developing subsoil wealth than did Continental land law.

II

“The true aristocratic theory of civil government,” according to Matthew Arnold, gives primacy to local government: “with the local government in their hands . . . [landowners] do not wish to see the state overshadowing them and ordering them about.” In other words, for Arnold the key to landed power was to be found in the localities. Nineteenth-century landed elites seem to confirm this. Those elites that were strong nationally—the English, Prussian, and to a lesser extent the Spanish—in one way or another controlled their
localities. Those elites that were not strong nationally—the French and the Russian—did not control their localities.

The English landed elite ruled the countryside through the justice of the peace, an unpaid oligarch who was usually a landowner. Rule by justices persisted deep into the nineteenth century—until the Local Government Act of 1888 installed in place of the appointed justices elected county councils. Although in some counties before 1888 there was a decline in the number of justices who were landowners, by and large landowners remained predominant.\(^{37}\) Even after 1888 landowners were powerful in local government; up to the end of the century many of them were elected to the county councils.

The Prussian landed elite ruled the countryside through the bureaucratic *Landrat*, who was at once an official of the central government and the representative of the landowners. Prussia also had a locally elected assembly, the *Kreistag*, which was likewise dominated by the landed elite—at least until 1872.\(^{58}\) The *Kreistag*, however, possessed small power compared to the *Landrät*, who remained the dominant force in local government. In spite of the fact that the office of *Landrat* became increasingly professionalized, “as late as 1914 well over half the *Landräte* in the eastern provinces were noblemen.” In a prime Junker province like Pomerania the proportion in 1890 was about 90 percent.\(^{59}\)

The Spanish landed elite ruled the countryside through *caciquismo*, a kind of bossism, as Professor Herr describes it in his paper. The *cacique* stood outside the official hierarchies: a local boss, a manipulator of votes, a dispenser of patronage. Unlike the Prussian *Landrat* or the English justice of the peace, his chief function was to circumvent the central government. This secret network of influence and power frustrated both bureaucratic and party agents in the localities and undermined the judiciary. Precisely what the relations between the landed elite and *caciquismo* were is not clear, but that the landed elite managed to get its way is clear enough.

The French and Russian landed elites, on the other hand, were weak locally. The *conseils généraux*, French equivalents of the Prussian *Kreistag* and the English county council, were not dominated by landowners. In 1840 only 17 percent of the councils were noblemen, and in 1870 only 27.6 percent.\(^{60}\) The increase was probably due as much to the inflation of dubious titles as to the growth of landed influence. In any case, the number of nobles was not impressive. Even had it been, it would not have meant much. As Dr Zeldin points out, the councils “were never able to obtain very extensive power and the state-appointed prefect was . . . the more or less omnipotent authority at the
local level.” After 1830, moreover, the prefect was rarely a noble landowner, and the policy he administered was likely to favor the peasantry. In the mid-1850s Nassau Senior spelled out in detail the prefect’s powers. “The Prefet appoints the Maires; the Prefet appoints in every canton a Commissaire de Police, . . . the Gardes champêtres, who are the local police, are put under his control; the Rector, who was a sort of local Minister of Education in every department, is suppressed; his powers are transferred to the Prefet; the Prefet appoints, promotes and dismisses all the masters of the écoles primaires. The Prefet can destroy the prosperity of every commune that displeases him . . . [he] can dissolve the Conseil general of his department, and although he cannot actually name their successors, he does so virtually.”

In Russia the central bureaucracy was always in control of the localities, and it controlled them not in the interest of landowners or merchants or of anyone else but in the interest of the state: “the [Russian] State,” according to Professor Gerschenkron, “was not the State of this or that class. It was the State’s State.” On occasion in the nineteenth century, the central bureaucracy encouraged landowners to run their local affairs, but it did not do so consistently nor for long. Significantly the emancipation of the serfs, that huge scheme of social engineering in the Russian countryside, was not the work of the landowners, who largely opposed it, but the work of the imperial bureaucracy.

The Prussian and English elites, strong in the localities, most clearly held on to the national power. How they used that power is worth pondering. The English landed elite governed the nation in a liberal and open spirit, the Prussian in an illiberal and closed one. In his book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Barrington Moore dwells on these differences. As he sees it, the English landed elite was something of a freak—having broken away from the standard type. This type, represented by the Prussians, arose from certain social elements: a bureaucratic monarchy, an oppressed peasantry, a blood and soil ideology, and a timid middle class. The last, Barrington Moore sees as the key element. In England the middle class was strong, long rooted in a tradition of freedom, capable of imposing its outlook on the rest of society. Accordingly, the English landed elite, Barrington Moore seems to suggest, was but a coroneted version of the English middle class, prizing freedom because it had no choice in the matter.
There is some truth in this, but it is not the whole truth. Love of liberty inhered in the collective mentality of the English landed elite itself. Rather than being forced by a new class to be libertarian, the English landed elite was fundamentally disposed to be so. Historically it had defined itself against the crown, against the principles of autocracy, against the maintenance of large standing armies. At bottom, this was what that landlords' assembly otherwise known as Parliament stood for. Parliament, in turn, helped school the nation in liberal practices and a liberal spirit. Thus it may be said that the influence of the landed elite moved downwards in society. Professor Thompson vividly demonstrates in his paper how the landed elite in some ways stamped the middle class—or a part of it—with its own "cast of ideas," to use a phrase of Matthew Arnold's.

Two examples may help to illustrate this libertarian disposition. Between 1815 and 1822 the English government took to a repressive Toryism and, according to Barrington Moore, might well have turned Junker. At that very time, however, a large part of the English governing class—the Whiggish part—was fiercely conducting county meetings throughout the English countryside. Much about these meetings was hardly Junkerlike. Often attended by hundreds, sometimes thousands, of persons of all social classes, these large public assemblies freely and openly discussed the leading issues of the day, concluding with a series of resolutions drawn up in the form of parliamentary petitions. To an Austrian nobleman who was present at a Kentish county meeting in 1822 this display of free discussion under the auspices of a disputatious aristocracy was an astonishing sight—as he put it, an extraordinary mixture of democracy and aristocracy nowhere else to be found in Europe.64

English landowners also displayed their liberal principles in supporting the politics of Italian unification. For them Garibaldi was a hero. In his famous visit to London in 1864, he was driven through tumultuous London crowds in the carriage of the duke of Sutherland—whose duchess later took him to Eton to receive the cheers of aristocratic schoolboys.65 For Prussian landowners, the hero's mantle fell not on Garibaldi but on Francis II, king of Naples, whom Garibaldi had driven into exile.66 To this inglorious if unfortunate monarch, Prussian noblemen presented a silver shield as a token of their admiration. On it the king was depicted "slaying numerous revolutionary demons ... crowned with the brightest crown of martyrdom" and was lauded as "the last and the noblest of the great principle of legitimacy."67

This libertarian disposition led the English landed elite to play a creative part in the shaping of free institutions in the nineteenth
century—a fact that is often overlooked. After all, governments led by the landed elite opened up both central and local government to the scrutiny of public opinion. They also put an end to a House of Commons dominated by aristocratic factions and replaced it with a House of Commons dominated by the party system, that political invention central to an age of free discussion. The party system was a vehicle of self-criticism, a political game with its own imperatives, compelling enough to lead the disputatious landed elite willy-nilly to unforeseen places and not wholly intended results. In time the age of discussion grew uncongenial to the landed elite. Not only did the argument persist in going against it but the discussion itself became too much of a hurly-burly—too technical, too time-consuming, often too expensive. Nonetheless, the landed elite, as Professor Thompson has pointed out, did not overturn the institutions of free public discussion, but simply retired from the scene. It submitted in the end to the force of the argument. As Tocqueville once noted, this was the most liberal aristocracy in the history of the world.68

On the other hand, Prussian landowners were never lovers of public disputation or of parliaments. As Professor Stern’s paper makes clear, what they loved best next to their estates was an army and all that went with it—splendid uniforms, military pomp, and chivalric codes of honor. From this soil came the distinctive Junker mentality, which found little to inhibit it in a society where public discussion was subdued if not outlawed.69 Accordingly, a conservative agrarianism was more alive at the end of the nineteenth century in Prussia than anything approaching it had ever been in England.70 Fifty years after the English landed elite submitted to the repeal of agricultural protection, the Prussian successfully fought for its retention with a fierceness and ingenuity that made earlier English efforts seem supine.71 The Prussians brooked no opposition. It never occurred to them to accept any other argument but their own.

This essay may well end with a brief appeal to the new generation of social historians, which has shown a fondness for subjects like collective mentality, demography, and the family. So far, these historians have looked downwards in society, believing that the densely populated depths have been neglected. No one would argue with this. It is worthwhile, however, to bring to their attention the riches that may be found should they turn their gaze upwards to study landed elites. Here their new interests could be amply indulged. What better place
to study family structure and dynamics. Landed elites are made up of families who, being prone to self-commemoration, leave behind them great quantities of revealing documentation. Their vanity well serves the historian's uses, and their records should be explored more fully.

NOTES

5. British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter cited as B.P.P.), 1874, LXXII, Return of Owners of Land, 1872-3. The raw data of the parliamentary return were abstracted and organized by John Bateman in The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland. In the final edition of this work, published in 1883, Bateman listed all landowners owning 2000 acres and more and indicated their total holdings county by county. This was a valuable service.
7. Bateman, Great Landowners, p. 515. The figures for smaller private owners and for public bodies refer to England and Wales and are thus not strictly comparable to the figures for the large owners, which refer to England alone. To have made them so would have involved a great deal of work to little purpose: the order of magnitude is accurate enough.
Toulouse nobleman suffered heavier losses in his nonagricultural income, which would have increased his vulnerability as a landowner.

13. Presumably following Labrousse, Forster estimates that the average noble holding in eighteenth-century France was 370 acres.

14. In an 1842 letter to his sister; see R. Disraeli, ed., *Lord Beaconsfield's Correspondence with His Sister* 1823–52 (London, 1886), p. 182. Disraeli also declared that "there are only one hundred men [landowners, presumably] who have £10,000 per annum." Was this an invention of Disraeli's fertile imagination?

15. This statistical information is taken from the following reports: B.P.P., 1870, LXVII, *Reports from H.M.'s Representatives respecting the Tenure of Land in the Several Countries of Europe*, p. 355; B.P.P., 1890–1, LXXXIII, *Reports . . . on the Position of Peasant Proprietors*, p. 54. Both of these reports are based on the Prussian statistics of the 1850s which, it would seem, provide information on the number of estates and landowners as distinct from the number of farms. Later German statistics (for 1882, 1895, and 1907), it would seem, confine themselves to farms.


20. Of the 15,000 large estates in Prussia in the 1850s, only about 4,000 were Rittergüter (B.P.P., 1870, LXVII, *Reports . . . respecting the Tenure of Land*, p. 355). This being the case, to say (as is often said) that only 57 percent of the Rittergüter in the 1850s were in noble hands may also exaggerate the displacement of traditional authority. The source of this exaggeration is the classic article by Hans Rosenberg, "Die 'Demokratisierung' der Rittergutbesitzer Klasse," in W. Berges and C. Hinrichs, eds., *Zur Geschichte und Problematik der Demokratie: Festgabe für Hans Herzfeld* (Berlin, 1958).


27. See the helpful “Glossary, Chart, Maps and Bibliography” on French inheritance laws presented by R. Giesey, E. Richards, and R. Wheaton to the Society for French Historical Studies, 9–10 April 1976. Of course, division of property does not necessarily mean the physical division of landed estates. There might be sufficient nonlanded property to allow the land to remain intact; or mortgages might be raised on the land to pay the portions of younger children.


33. Malefakis, Agrarian Reform, p. 68.

34. B.P.P., 1870, LXVII, Reports . . . respecting the Tenure of Land, p. 290. In the enlarged post-1870 Prussia, the area covered by the fideicommisism was about the same (see B.P.P., 1896, LXXXIV, General and Detailed Reports . . . on the Systems of Registration of Title, p. 40).

35. A. M. Anfimov, Kruptnoe poselschch’e khoziaistvo europeiskoi Rossii (Moscow, 1969), pp. 43–46. I am indebted to Professor Blum for this reference.


39. It is sometimes also suggested that Russian land banks propped up landed finances to the extent of tolerating defaulters, but in the absence of detailed studies of Russian (and other) land banks, one hesitates to accept such an odd notion about banks.


41. I am indebted to Professor Frederick Gillen for this information.

42. The Economist (London), Jan. 5, 1856.

43. Raymond Carr puts this point succinctly: “There were differing levels of absenteeism at differing levels of the noble’s world.” R. Carr, Spain, 1808–1939 (Oxford, 1966), p. 41.


45. Carr, Spain, p. 42.

46. Simpson, Correspondence . . . of de Tocqueville with William Nassau Senior, 1:169. Tocqueville himself noticed the difference (Simpson, 1:114–15).


49. For a recent account of Prussian emancipation and agricultural development, see R. A. Dickler, “Organization and Change in Productivity in Eastern Prussia,” in Parker and Jones, European Peasants and Their Markets.

50. For a recent account of French peasant farming, see G. W. Grantham, “Scale and Organization in French Farming, 1840–1880,” in Parker and Jones, European Peasants and Their Markets.


55. For Continental land law, see B.P.P., 1887, LXXXI, Reports by H.M.’s Representatives Abroad on Mining Rents and Royalties, pp. 8–9; also B.P.P., 1893–4, XLI, Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on Mining Royalties, pp. 285–86. For urban development on the Continent, see B.P.P., 1896, LXXXIV, General and Detailed Reports . . . on the System of Registration of Title, p. 12; also B.P.P., 1884, LXXXIII, Reports of H.M.’s Representatives Abroad upon the System of Tenure of Dwelling Houses, p. 13. Some English landowners like the Howards and the Russells owned valuable market rights in cities like Sheffield and London, but these too did not exist on the Continent (see B.P.P., 1890–1, XLI, Royal Commission on Market Rights and Tolls, pp. 14–15).


57. I base this statement on the incomplete doctoral dissertation of Robert Shorthouse, who is examining closely the justices in five English counties, 1790–1889.


63. See especially Moore, Social Origins, pp. 418–25. Sometimes Moore suggests that the bourgeoisie did not always have its own way, but this is not the dominant impression left by his book. See also the most searching of the reviews of Moore’s book by R. Dore, “Making Sense of History,” Archives européennes de sociologie 10 (1969): 295–305.


67. Saturday Review (London), October 14, 1865.


70. See K. D. Barkin, Controversy over German Industrialization 1890–1902 (Chicago, 1970).

71. See A. Gerschenkron, Bread and Democracy in Germany (Berkeley, 1943), pp. 26–27.