BOOK REVIEW

Gilded Youth: Privilege, Rebellion and the British Public School by James Brooke-Smith (Reaktion, 2019) 296 pp., hardback, £25

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James Brooke-Smith's *Gilded Youth: Privilege, Rebellion and the British Public School* tells an engaging narrative history of the British public school from the eighteenth century to today. Foregrounding the influence of the public school's Victorian incarnation on British identity, the book pays special attention to the endless struggle endured by public schoolboys between conformity and rebellion.

Brooke-Smith employs Erving Goffman's concept of the 'total institution' (p. 79) to explore how the Victorian public school became an elite-producing factory for the industrial age. Schools sought to mould the characters of its students through severe regulations, strict routine, and overpowering psychological conditions. The Gothic-style architecture, the ritualistic disciplinary flogging, the inexorable hierarchies, and the code of emotional reserve compounded the sensorial and psychological influence of the institution on its 'inmates'. Social, political, and cultural changes beyond the schoolyard gates added emphases on organized sports, physical discipline, and national pride.

Still, each generation of students found ways to 'signal their dissent and express their individuality' (p. 81). Modes of dissent included not only trivial after-hours bantering in the dormitory and derailing class discussion, but also illicit sexual behaviour and outré intellectual activity. Students cultivated a shadow system of dissent beneath public schools' furiously conventional veneer. In this way, public schools shaped not only conformist students who joined elite institutions as adults, but also dissenters who pioneered upper-class countercultures. Brooke-Smith highlights schoolboy riots, athlete-aesthete culture clashes, leftist politics, escapism through pop culture, and the perennial foil of institutional conservatism as formative experiences for the budding *avant-garde*. Rebellion transformed public schools – and through them, pedagogical culture generally – in unexpected ways. Brooke-

Smith explains widespread academic adoption of middle-class morality as a reaction to aristocratic libertarianism and violent student uprisings at pre-Victorian public schools. Reports of sexual deviancy at these hallowed institutions ignited moral panics. Schoolmasters invented increasingly sophisticated surveillance systems to police their charges.

Public schools were not all suppression and sedition. Legendary schoolmaster Thomas Arnold's idealist Christian project of moral development and social consciousness drove elite-led reform for a generation. The warmer experience of these schools proved literarily fecund in its own right, producing an entire 'public school' genre. Queen Victoria and countless of her student-subjects around the globe imbibed Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* daily. That novel's heir, J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, enjoys even wider and more intense popularity today. For generations, these books engendered nostalgia for public school culture even among those who could never afford the tuition.

On the other hand, peculiar public-school rites drove a proliferation of other literary innovations and readership trends as well. Humorously meaningless translations produced from rote Latin exercises inspired Lewis Carroll's 'nonsense literature'. (Tutors 'did not mind if […] pupils wrote nonsense, so long as it was elegant and metrically accurate nonsense' [p. 115].) Nineteenth-century demand for flagellation pornography arose from the long-term psychological impact of public-school corporal punishment. The 'critical' public-school memoir genre of the twentieth century complicated the trope of nostalgia in typical public-school narratives with anger. Brooke-Smith's analyses of these dissenting literary offshoots of the public school provide a fuller picture of the impact of the total institution and its structural forces. They also reflect Brooke-Smith's own irreverence toward the institution. For instance, whereas Christopher Stray opened his monograph *Classics Transformed* (2006) lamenting the recent neglect of classics in British curricula, Brooke-Smith builds on Stray's analysis by focusing on the absurdities of classical learning and treating its recent decline as inevitable.

Still, public schools survived substantial criticism over the twentieth century. Brooke-Smith argues they did so through an evolution in form of elitism: from aristocracy to meritocracy. Top-tier facilities and extracurriculars intended to give competitive advantages in university admissions replaced the classics-and-character model. Yet old signals of privilege remain. Public schools promote their 'perfect

marriage of modernity and tradition' (p. 241) with glossy promotional brochures showing off Victorian architecture and landscapes. Far from skewering these aristocratic bastions, popular culture generally continues to indulge nostalgia for public schools. ITV's acclaimed 1981 adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and, of course, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books perhaps best convey the hagiographic pop vision of the public school. As Brooke-Smith writes, 'In spite of its elite demographics, the public school is an iconic space of Englishness that has informed the attitudes and ideals of countless generations of young people, both within and beyond its imposing stone walls' (p. 11).

Brooke-Smith reckons throughout the book with how to write about the psychological severity of the Victorian public school without blurring historical inquiry with twenty-first-century values. He occasionally shifts genres to address this challenge. Moving between analysis and memoir, he incorporates anecdotes from his own experience as a public-school rebel and readily concedes his biases toward an institution that shaped him. This gesture provides transparency as well as an innovative approach to academic writing.

At times, however, the author's main argument risks quashing nuanced readings of the primary sources. Brooke-Smith's interpretation of *Tom Brown's Schooldays,* for example, portrays it as a 'thinly veiled sermon' (p. 65) championing Arnoldian values, Muscular Christianity, and the Victorian public-school ethos. This serves Brooke-Smith's larger point that public school offered a crucial vehicle for the dissemination of public-school values. But it perhaps overlooks the novel's subtle critique of the public school. As Elizabeth Gargano wrote in 2008, 'though often portrayed by later readers as an example of mindless school boosterism, Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) in fact offers a much more mixed portrait of school life than is generally allowed' (p. 3). Brooke-Smith offers two defenses for his tendency to a 'one-sided' approach. First, he remains convinced of the ills of the public school's legacy. Second, he seeks to capture 'the sheer intensity of feeling that the public school experience has generated over the years' (p. 258). Fair enough. While a friendlier vision of the public school may be sought elsewhere, Brooke-Smith's monograph models an experimental mode of academic writing for those grappling between professional objectivity and personal stake.

Gilded Youth offers a gripping, thought-provoking history of the British public school. It also provides a richly useful model for academic writing and

teaching. Beyond the captivating style and format, Brooke-Smith's book models a mode of writing that acknowledges his own position and explores ways to reckon with an institution that remains shaped by its thorny past.

Bibliography

Gargano, Elizabeth, *Reading Victorian Schoolrooms* (London: Routledge, 2008)