

Literature Review of Independent Schools

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Analyzing English public schools is a national pastime. The literature is vast, and opinion ranges from total vilification to unqualified praise. American independent schools have never excited the same interest nor provoked the equivalent abuse. Clustered largely in the Northeast, they educate only 2 percent of the American population. Attendance is not considered a prerequisite for an elite job.

For a decade now American public schools have enjoyed a bad press; and independent-school enrollment has increased, even while the school-age population has declined. Large-scale federal aid to private education via tuition tax credits is seriously discussed. Free enterprise in education is seen as a corollary to an emphasis on free enterprise in the economy and as an alternative to a large, sluggish state system from which discipline, excellence, and accountability are missing. The question of independent schools (and of private schooling in general) has become more urgent.

What have independent schools done for their graduates? Have they produced public servants, humanists, or plutocrats? Are they tepid holding tanks for the rich, perpetuating class differences; or are they experimental and purveyors of excellence? Are they different from, better than, worse than public schools? Does freedom from state control, from certification requirements and unions, and the necessity to satisfy clients if such be the case produce a leaner, bolder, more responsive school? These are large questions, but one's response to them is important because it determines how one feels about such policy questions as tuition tax credits, vouchers, and teacher certification. And one cannot have a thoughtful response without knowing more about the literature on independent schools. This literature is small compared with its English counterpart, but sufficiently large, sufficiently unknown, and of enough quality and relevance to merit an examination.

The literature on American independent schools concentrates heavily on the elite New England boarding schools. It includes academic histories, novels, field studies using sociological terms and language, journalistic accounts, Ed.D. dissertations characterized by liberal use of questionnaires, biographies and autobiographies of headmasters, and numerous magazine and newspaper articles.

By far the best historical study of American independent schools is James McLachlan's *American Boarding Schools*. McLachlan studies the gradual emergence of the prep school between 1800 and 1920. He insists that American

boarding schools were not mere carbon copies of English public schools, that they grew slowly out of the academies, that they reflect American thought and peculiarly American problems, and that they were not aristocratic or upper-class institutions.

Independent schools, according to McLachlan, were to be rural retreats, small organic families under the supervision of a benevolent but demanding father figure, mingling strenuous work and play, producing character and a sense of social responsibility, and culminating in admission to elite colleges. The responsible Christian gentleman was the ultimate goal.

Generally McLachlan offers a revisionist and favorable picture of America's boarding schools. Using Groton and Exeter as perhaps atypical examples, he argues that they did not produce effete, decadent snobs but rather an astonishingly high proportion of public servants. He finds the headmasters not particularly intellectual but quite idealistic and moralistic, committed to molding character, the superegos of their institutions. They successfully united a conservative Christian tradition with Progressivism.

American Boarding Schools concentrated on a few elite schools. Laurence Fuller's carefully done, original 450-page dissertation, "Education for Leadership: The Emergence of the College Preparatory School," surveys a large variety of schools between the Civil War and World War I. Using an impressive variety of materials—school catalogs, newspapers, yearbooks, diaries, manuscript histories—Fuller offers a detailed and interesting inside portrait of students, faculty, headmasters, and alumni.

Fuller agrees with McLachlan that the schools stressed character building through athletics rather than through religion. Like McLachlan, he stresses the number of leaders produced by independent schools and the excellence of the education. But Fuller seems to differ from McLachlan in his stress on the preservation of class position as a key motive for the creation and support of private schools. Families were afraid of immigrants and co-ed, city public schools. Colleges were perceived "as necessary for a professional or managerial career,"¹ and private schools could "guarantee that the children of the well-to-do would have adequate formal education to enable them to attain leadership roles in twentieth-century America."²

E. Digby Baltzell, a professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, is a serious student of America's upper class. Baltzell has not written a book on independent schools; but in a readable, serious study, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class*, he has a chapter on the relation of education to class position. Baltzell certainly concedes some of the reasons for the development of private schools mentioned by other researchers: as rural retreats, as escapes from busy fathers and doting mothers, and as feeders of particular colleges. He also concedes the excellence of the education offered, but he insists that these schools were primarily patronized by America's leading families, who used them to improve or solidify their class position.

Baltzell, then, sees elite prep schools as offering something more than a good education, a surrogate family, and an indoctrination in bourgeois virtues and the philosophy of *noblesse oblige*: He sees them as crucial institutions in cementing class position and in providing status symbols. Unlike McLachlan, he criticizes them for producing too many corporation executives and too few public servants, for not assimilating different ethnic groups, and for producing graduates who are conservative and conformist.

A student of Baltzell, Christopher S. Armstrong, did an excellent case study of two elite prep schools and the ways they influenced their graduates. "Privilege and Productivity: The Cases of Two Private Schools and Their Graduates" is particularly interesting because the two schools had opposing philosophies.

Hotchkiss stressed structure, order, character building, and the Protestant virtues. It favored religion, ritual, competitive team sports. In curriculum it stressed the classics and intellectual excellence. In pedagogy it stressed the importance of role models and traditional instruction.

Putney was also a rural retreat, educating the upper classes. But it educated the children of artists and intellectuals and was a product of the Progressive movement. Putney downplayed religion, ritual, academic competition, dress codes, organized athletics. It stressed creativity and service more than character or intellectual excellence.

Armstrong's dissertation is excellent in describing the origins and values of the two schools. Generally, it argues that each offered a different but excellent education and that the schools, being "total" institutions with a purpose, had a lasting effect on their graduates. He traces the career patterns of some graduates and shows that Hotchkiss fed the business establishment, while Putney produced more professionals and intellectuals. However, the dissertation does not disentangle family influence from school influence in producing a certain type of graduate. Hotchkiss students may well have fed the Protestant Establishment, no matter where they went to school.

There are a number of institutional histories of private schools. Naturally, they have to be celebratory and are thus less than helpful. Furthermore, nearly all merely list events—a new building or a new headmaster—rather than attempt to find a pattern or meaning.

Headmasters' biographies or autobiographies are more useful. Claude Fuess's *Independent Schoolmaster* gives an interesting account of the growth of Andover and the joys of being a headmaster. Richard Day's *A New England Schoolmaster* does the same for Mt. Hermon. Both are very upbeat. Neither offers Laurence Fuller's more typical and realistic account:

So many demands did the job of School Head make upon the men and women who held it that it often ruined their health, family life and spirit. Their private reports and correspondence frequently contain evidence of

their being close to despair, a note that seldom crept into their public statements.³

John McPhee's portrait of Frank Boyden in *The Headmaster* is done with McPhee's usual charm and grace. The book gives a sense of the heroic efforts and total commitment needed to build a major school; and while occasionally sentimental, McPhee is candid about Boyden's anti-intellectualism and political adroitness.

Private schools in America have inspired several novels, but never the volume of commentary written on English public schools. John Burns was a teacher at Loomis before becoming a novelist. However, *Lucifer with a Book* seems as overwrought as the title. All is nastiness, evil, and repression at boarding school. Richard Yates's recent effort, *A Good School*, is more subtle and low-key, but not much more favorable about boarding school life. Louis Auchincloss's *The Rector of Justin* is allegedly a portrait of Endicott Peabody of Groton. It is a skillful novel. Whether Dr. Francis Prescott is Peabody is debatable. He certainly emerges as a more complex figure than the man described by James McLachlan—but as equally and repellently moralistic. Fictional accounts of American independent schools do not seem particularly favorable.

During the 1960s there was a revisionist look at private schools. In 1951 Alan Heely offered the usual pieties—leadership, educational excellence, character building—in his bland defense of private education, *Why the Private School?* In 1972 Richard Gaines, in *The Finest Education Money Can Buy*, castigated Lawrenceville for perpetuating elitism and for not recognizing that the youth of the sixties were different—not money-grubbing, future corporation executives, but idealistic and egalitarian—and thus deserving of freedom and a revised curriculum. Gaines is a little too reminiscent of Charles Reich, but his is typical sixties rhetoric.

Peter Prescott, in *A World of Our Own*, makes a more subtle but, to some people, quite devastating critique of Choate in the late 1960s. Prescott is a journalist and disclaims any sociological or educational expertise. Nevertheless, he offers the best existing field study of an American boarding school.

Much of Prescott's book is sheer description. He carried his tape recorder everywhere and recorded a number of fascinating conversations. In the second half of the book, he describes Choate as it is buffeted by problems with drugs, blacks, and Vietnam. It is fairly clear that Prescott, while conceding that Choate offers an excellent academic education, thinks Seymour St. John is making a mistake trying to play Arnold of Rugby in the late 1960s. He certainly implies that a benevolent dictatorship is no way to run a school and that Choate's vaunted isolation is unhealthy.

The best overall study of independent schools today is contained in Otto F. Kraushaar's *American Nonpublic Schools—Patterns of Diversity*. Kraushaar and his associates used a combination of questionnaires and school visits to

give a judicious, balanced, detailed portrait of all aspects of nonpublic schools—students, teachers, administrators, trustees, finances, state aid, and public policy. In his discussion, Kraushaar distinguishes among and compares Protestant, Catholic, and independent schools. He insists, "It seems equally obvious that for the public schools to acquire a virtual monopoly in educating the young would be a major social disaster."⁴

The first half of *American Nonpublic Schools* is descriptive. Kraushaar, relying heavily on McLachlan, sketches the antecedents of independent schools, stressing the enormous variety of day schools and their connection with Progressivism. Many of his subsequent findings are predictable, but Kraushaar has given statistical confirmation to "what everyone knew" and has lucidly and objectively sketched out the dilemmas facing independent schools. He is generally complimentary to independent schools—though with the usual recipe of reforms that seem either bland or impractical.

The other comprehensive survey of independent schools today is Leonard Baird's *The Elite Schools*. Baird, who is a staff psychologist at Educational Testing Service, sent detailed questionnaires to thirty-five boarding schools and seven day schools. He supplemented the survey responses with "several thousand comments written by students, teachers, and administrators and many face-to-face interviews."⁵ Baird praises independent schools for stressing academic excellence, producing leaders, and attempting some educational experiments. However, he is skeptical of the progress independent schools have made in ethical training and, like Kraushaar, wants "a wider view of excellence."⁶

Again, the recipe of reforms is not particularly original; and Baird, like Kraushaar, seems to accept the questioning of the 1960s. Baird allows that a degree of academic excellence is necessary for the successful functioning of our society, and that the clients of independent schools will probably continue to demand excellence, even if "excellence and comfort are not always completely compatible."⁷ *The Elite Schools* does have an interesting chapter making a limited comparison between independent schools and elite suburban schools.

The National Association of Independent Schools attempts to collect any information that appears in newspapers or magazines about independent schools. They have a fairly reliable clipping service for the years 1970–1979, a service that offers an interesting look at how private schools are presented to the public. From 1940–1970 there were a number of celebratory stories, generally in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Town and Country*, presenting a favorable picture of independent schools.

In the late sixties and early seventies, however, there were some discordant notes. Enrollments dipped, prep school students were affected by the counterculture, and some schools closed. *Town and Country* ran an article entitled "Are the Privileged Schools Obsolete?" and *Travel and Leisure* found there was a "Crisis under the Elms."

For the last few years, however, newspapers and magazines have been quite kind to independent schools. Independent schools are portrayed as the enemy of permissiveness, as being academically rigorous, and as stressing the basics. They are presented as recruiting further down in the middle class, as dipping into the working class via scholarships, and as no longer being "snob" schools. Independent-school teachers are seen as free from the trade-union mentality, as hard-working, idealistic, and caring even if underpaid.

What conclusions, if any, can we draw from this *mélange* of commentary? Much of it centers on the name boarding schools of New England—probably because they are old, have records, are "total" institutions (influencing impressionable adolescents day and night); and because journalists, scholars, and the public are not so interested in the ordinary. There is little on day schools except from Kraushaar and Baird. There are no scholarly field studies, such as two recently done on Canadian private schools, and no significant large-scale questionnaire studies.

The literature agrees that the boarding schools were rural retreats, escapes from busy fathers and doting mothers, and feeders of particular colleges; and that they offered a strenuous blend of academic work and athletics, a blend that allegedly built character and prepared one for professional jobs. Predictably, the literature disagrees on whether the schools were set up to cement class position and on whether they stressed intellect, character, and public service or money-making and membership in the upper classes. The commentators are uniformly complimentary about the quality of the intellectual education offered. Baltzell and Prescott come closest to being serious critics of American independent schools; and they are quite gentle compared with George Orwell, Graham Greene, or Alec Waugh.

Baird and Kraushaar would like a wider view of excellence—more arts, individualization, relevance, and an "emphasis on values, attitudes and feelings."⁸ Books written during the 1960s criticized rigid rules, autocratic headmasters, and antiquated curriculums; and fictional accounts were hostile, finding boarding schools petty and stifling.

The literature on headmasters suggests that the freedom of independent schools encourages educational entrepreneurship. Since 1940, media coverage has been favorable, except for some discordant notes in the 1960s. In the last few years, reporters have been particularly complimentary, mentioning independent schools' concern with quality and a diverse student body.

The literature, unfortunately, does not directly answer some of the questions posed in the introduction to this review. We will have to wait on several studies underway for comparisons with public schools and for observations on the consequences of freedom from the state and dependency on paying clients. We have little, for example, on what freedom means for teachers, the classroom, and curriculum. And public school proponents will insist that

such comparisons are meaningless as long as independent schools can select pleasant, intelligent, motivated students and exclude the difficult.

Notes

1 Lawrence Fuller, "Education for Leadership: The Emergence of the College Preparatory School" (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1974), p. 210.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

4 Otto Kraushaar, *American Nonpublic Schools* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. x.

5 Leonard Baird, *The Elite Schools* (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1977), p. xvi.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 142.