Review Article

Insights of a Master Historian

Harold Perkin Northwestern University

David Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, Yale University Press, 1998, pp. xiv + 242, £19.95; **David Cannadine**, *History in Our Time*, Yale University Press, 1998, pp. xiv + 308, £16.95.

'The most class-ridden society under the sun', George Orwell, that old Etonian slum-visitor, described England in 1940. The phrase is constantly recalled today by his compatriots as well as by visiting foreigners. John Major aimed in 1990 to make Britain 'a classless society', implying that it still had a long way to go. While Tony Blair thinks we are nearly all middle-class now, and the Third Way is to complete the job, his fellow Britons do not agree. Recent polls reported in *The Guardian* (15 and 20 January 1999) found that 60 per cent of people consider themselves working-class compared with 35 per cent middle-class – 5 per cent don't know, or wish to hide the fact that they are either homeless or fat cats too ashamed to own up. In the second poll 76 per cent agree with the statement that 'there is a struggle between the classes'. Marxism, it seems, despite Thatcher and 'the end of history', is still alive and well and living in Britain.

But what do we mean by class? It has become one of the most abused and ambiguous concepts in contemporary discourse. In the first of these two brilliant books, David Cannadine, new Director of the Institute of Historical Research in London, has analysed its usage by historians and others over the last three centuries. He concludes that it has been used interchangeably in three different and conflicting ways. He takes a hint from a bourgeois citizen of Montpellier in 1768 (in Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre*) who saw his town at one and the same time as a continuous hierarchical procession, a triad of nobility, bourgeoisie and commoners, and a dichotomous struggle between rich and poor. The first model is a uniform pyramid of many status levels or positions in society, in which people know their place and accept it as a fact of life. The second is the triadic model, which people naturally fall into when they distinguish between those with riches and power, the poor and powerless, and the comfortable people in between. Thirdly, there is a dichotomous model, the haves against the have-nots, 'Us versus Them', which inevitably leads to theories of conflict, class war, and revolution.

All three are 'ignorant over-simplifications of the complexity of society' but they have nonetheless had real effects upon politics, the economy, and social life over the last three centuries. But they are not figments of the imagination, rhetorical constructs with no material content. Cannadine rejects 'the linguistic turn' that the post-modernists have tried to impose upon the disciplines of history and literary criticism in recent years, which believes that class is 'all in the mind', a fiction created by texts. In this he is surely right. Sex, after all, may be 'all in the mind' but babies, adultery and jealous rage are material enough. In fact, all abstract concepts are 'in the mind', and intellectual analysis would be impossible without them. The linguistic turn has proved to be a dead end, a self-defeating exercise in navel gazing, which makes both historical and literary understanding redundant and futile. Science too is 'all in the mind' but that does not make global warming or biological warfare less terrifying. To Bishop Berkeley's theory that the whole world was 'in the mind', Dr Johnson replied by kicking a large stone: 'I refute it *thus*.' If the theory were true, we would still be forced to accept and live by the fiction that it was false. Cannadine allows that language shapes our perceptions of the world and of the social structure, but the perceptions are themselves real and have material consequences.

Since Adam Smith and the classical economists the triadic model, based on the occupational division between landlords, capitalists and workers, has been the most common and casually accepted in describing society. Since Marx the dual model of class struggle between the property owners together and the labouring proletariat has been applied alongside it, depending on whether the first two, representing property, are seen as in conflict with the propertyless, or the second two, representing the producers against the 'idle rich', are the latter's opponents. The dichotomous model, Cannadine argues, dominated historiography in the twentieth century down to the 1970s. It explained the age of revolutions, French and Industrial, as 'the making of the working class', in Edward Thompson's formula, as distinct from 'the birth of class' (meaning all three, and eventually four) as in mine (*The Origins of Modern English Society*, chapter 6).

This class interpretation of industrialism, which Cannadine, somewhat unfairly in my opinion, calls the Marxist or Marxisant view – it might more accurately be called the Weberian, Toynbeean or Tawneyesque – dominated the accounts written by the post-war generation of historians from the 1950s to the 1970s. Since then it has, in his opinion not mine, been superseded by a post-modern version which repudiates class and insists on the older, hierarchical tradition of a many-layered society in which people rarely think of themselves as members of warring groups but as individuals with very specific relations with their immediate contacts, relatives, neighbours, pub and club goers, and workplace bosses and mates. This, Cannadine argues, is the most persistent and natural way that most people think of their social environment, the 'default' position to which they automatically return. Rather than engage in constant mutual disdain or conflict, they think of themselves first as members of a community or citizens of the nation.

Intellectuals who think, or think they think, systematically about society are constantly amazed when, as in every war from the Napoleonic through the Crimean, the First and Second World Wars, the Suez crisis, to the Falklands scrap, the national majority forgets everything else and hurls itself into patriotic jingoism. Linda Colley has shown how Britishness created itself in the eighteenth century through conflict with the French. The same could be said for national pride against the Germans in the early twentieth, against the Russians in the Cold War, or amongst Europhobes against the European Union. But it is a slippery concept. Welsh and Scottish nationalism is inconceivable without the centuries-old 'oppression' by the English: which comes first, Celtic or British patriotism? And where do we place the New Commonwealth immigrants and their children? Do we apply Norman Tebbitt's 'cricket test'? We are all bundles of overlapping and conflicting loyalties, and shift unthinkingly from one to another as different issues crowd upon us.

The same goes for community, the Thatcherite and New Labour notion of where we should belong. Like apple pie, everyone is for it – until they realise that, as with families, there are dysfunctional communities as well as benevolent ones. Battered wives and abused children do not relish 'family values' the way John Major does. Old people living on some council estates or kneecapped victims in Northern Ireland – 'punished' by their own side – do not share Tony Blair's warm feelings about community.

Still, the hierarchical model in its multiplicity does have the advantage of fitting more snugly the complexity of modern societies, and accommodates most people's diverse relations with the social environment in which they live their everyday lives. Yet its amorphous capaciousness makes it self-defeating as a tool of analysis. It suggests a uniformity of texture, like a giant Cheddar cheese, which makes it difficult to differentiate between its parts, except that some lie higher or lower in the whole. Paradoxically, it is both too complicated and not complex enough to match the social reality. To start with, there is not one hierarchy but many. Society is not so much a pyramid as a series of parallel ladders, converging indeed towards the top, but separate and competing with each other lower down. This was clearest in the eighteenth century, when the 'great functional interests', land (meaning farmers and labourers as well as landlords), and the various trades and industries from masters to journeymen and apprentices, plus the major professions of clergy, law and medicine, were in competition for status, income, and government favour. The same is becoming true today, when the professions are split between the public and the private sectors, and capitalism itself is divided between City finance, wholesale and retail commerce, and manufacturing (both employers and workers in all three), who each feel aggrieved at the others' influence on government and legislation, taxation and expenditure.

My own view, evolved through my interpretation of the Industrial Revolution as a social revolution and explicitly expressed in *The Rise of Professional Society* (1989, pp. 2–3), is that both class and hierarchy are always present in society. Which one is dominant depends on the current social, economic and political context and which, vertical or horizontal loyalty, competes or conflicts most evidently with which. Hierarchy and class are the warp and weft in the social fabric. Which is latent and which rises to dominate the face of the cloth is determined by the competition, whether between higher and lower groups – feudal lords and peasants, landowners and merchants, capitalists and workers – or between the functional interests – agriculture versus commerce, finance versus manufacturing, public versus private sector professionals. At times of transition, the fabric is like shot silk, warp or weft prevailing according to the angle of view. During the Industrial Revolution it was sometimes impossible to know whether a dispute between handworkers and masters was a vertical conflict between boss and wage earner or a horizontal dispute between craft and factory industry, and whether the Anti-Corn Law campaign was middle class versus aristocracy or manufacturing interest versus agriculture.

Cannadine seems to reflect this when he labels the mid-Victorian age 'a viable hierarchical society', echoing my 'viable class society' (*Origins*, chapter 9). This precisely mirrors the shot silk view of the social fabric: where one observer sees hierarchy, another sees class. It suggests a distinction without much difference. Nonetheless, amongst all the many books on class published in this confusedly class-obsessed decade, Cannadine's is the most insightful and illuminating. It opens up a field of discussion which has long been dominated by opposing ideologically committed activists, and frees us to think again about ourselves in our social context.

Cannadine's second and equally brilliant book seems at first sight a collection of ephemeral reviews, most of them not in learned journals but in the upmarket newspaper press. In fact, it is far more than that, a history of history-writing in the last decade. He has had the deserved and enviable good fortune to review, at length and in such prestigious journals as the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Guardian*, *Prospect*, the *London* and *New York Reviews of Books*, and the *New Yorker*, nearly all the significant modern

British histories and biographies of major figures published between 1989 and 1998. Together, unlike most such collections, the essays make up an integrated story, a robust skeleton history of the last two centuries.

The first section deals with the royal family since William IV, the heartless Duke of Clarence who lived off the actress Dorothy Jordan and had ten children by her before dumping her to die in poverty. It makes the remarkable point that, although Victoria was willing to pay tax (at the very low rates imposed by Peel and Gladstone), she managed to accumulate, for the first time in history, a magnificent private fortune, including private estates at Osborne and Balmoral, and to avoid Harcourt's new death duties of 1894. Edward VII tried unsuccessfully to escape income tax, but that dull but cunning monarch George V managed to persuade Lloyd George to exempt him (in exchange for helping to defeat the Lords in 1910, I would guess), an exemption which was gradually, and unconstitutionally, extended to the rest of the family. If John Major has one claim to fame, it is that he ended this scandalous outrelief for dependent royals.

On constitutional monarchy and Walter Bagehot's famous sovereign rights 'to be consulted, to encourage, and to warn', Cannadine tartly remarks that 'Bagehot simply made these "rights" up'. As to the renowned royal charity, British monarchs have until recently 'been more concerned with taking than with giving'. Edward VIII was a compulsive philanderer and admirer of fascists who was prepared to give up the throne for the woman he loved but resentfully expected to retain all the trimmings of royalty. The current Prince of Wales suffers the traditional longueurs as heir-apparent to a long-lived parent, but he too wants to have his cake and eat it, to enjoy the privileges of royalty while rejecting the irksome expectations of 'a family on the throne'. (The hopes of those who look to his son Will for salvation could turn out to be just as fruitless.) As for Saint Diana, 'she had been falling in public esteem' in the month before she died; if she had survived to marry an Al-Fayed, who knows how far she might have plummeted?

The second section, on the diverse histories of patriotism, privacy, suicide, Victorian things and values, the rise and fall of the British Empire to 1914, the state of contemporary 'classless' social history, Lord Annan's generation of 'second eleven' intellectuals, and the far-right American Gertrude Himmelfarb's Thatcherite travesty of Victorian morality, is full of stylistic gems and irreverent insights on fellow historians. The late Raphael Samuel's 'unrivalled displays of free associational virtuosity'; 'separate spheres' exist less in ordinary women's lives than in academic women's history departments; Patrick Joyce's 'self-indulgent incomprehensibility'; Theodore Zeldin's 'magisterially irritating history of France' dismissed by some as 'an amalgam of Gallic chic and pointillist obsession'; these are some of the iridescent insects pinned to the page that this reader will cherish.

The last section is a roundup of some of the most famous and controversial figures of our century: Florence Nightingale, 'a reformer of genius' who was also calculating, vindictive, the self-dramatising guardian of a misleading public image; Cecil Rhodes, ‘a Janus-faced giant’, part genius, part rogue; Winston Churchill, the fêted saviour of his country who lived too long and died in senile despair at having in the end, he thought, ‘achieved Nothing’; Max Beaverbrook, Lady Diana Cooper’s ‘strange attractive gnome’, who slithered his way up the greasy pole while living in a Chamberlinesque imperial past; his admiring biographer A. J. P. Taylor, the dazzling historical performer who ‘never fully came of age’; Sir Oswald Mosley, the womanising would-be dictator who never understood why his country rejected his call; Harold Macmillan, the shy ‘Supermac’ and reluctant showman, and Bob Boothby, the bisexual rogue who shared his wife and fathered his daughter; and, last but by no means least – if she could help it! – Margaret Thatcher, the now rusting Iron Lady, anti-government centraliser, and ‘that extraordinary paradox, a populist who is not popular.’

In these two books, as in his many others, Cannadine proves himself to be the master historian, a scintillating phrase maker, and a wise and witty guide to history in our time.