

**BRITISH
ARISTOCRACY AND
THE HOUSE OF LORDS**

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British Aristocracy and the House of Lords by Edward Carpenter

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By
Edward Carpenter

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*an Memoriam
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British Aristocracy and the House of Lords

IT has often been said that our victory at Waterloo was a great misfortune to England; and in general terms the truth of this remark can hardly be gainsaid. Our successes as against the armies of the Revolution certainly kept the current of new human forces and ideas associated with that movement at a distance, and warded it off from our shores. The feudal system, broken down and disorganised all over the Continent by Napoleon, preserved its old tradition in these islands. And one consequence has been that, in the matters of our Land-system and our Aristocracy, we are now a hundred years behind the rest of Western Europe.*

Our land-system, with its large estates breeding a servile and poor-spirited population of tenantry and farm labourers, has had the effect

* Not to mention our Penal and Civil Codes, so antiquated and cumbrous compared with the Code Napoléon.

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of clogging and depressing British agriculture—to such a degree, indeed, that the latter has become a thing despised and neglected by ourselves and derided by our neighbours. And our Aristocracy has developed to so monstrous and importunate a form that, like some huge parasite, it threatens disease and ruin to the organism upon which it has fastened. It is with the latter trouble that I am at this moment concerned.

It is indeed curious that Britain, which has for so long a time boasted herself in the forefront of human progress, should now be saddled with this institution—a reactionary institution of such magnitude and dead weight as no other nation in the world can show. And more curious still is it that, all the time, with great diligence and apparent zeal, she is enlarging and building up the absurd incubus which weighs her to the ground.

Poor Britain! with all her other burdens—her burdens of crying poverty, of huge population, of limited land, of distressing fogs both in the mental and physical atmosphere—to be actually fastening and riveting this extra one upon her own back! What must one think of such a nation? Has she lost her wits, and does she at all divine what she is doing? Is she still lost in a sleep of centuries, and living

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in dreams of three or four hundred years ago ?

There has in the past been a certain glamour and romance about the Feudal Aristocracy. Perhaps distance lends enchantment. We like to lose ourselves in a kind of Tennysonian dream of knights and ladies ; we know that once there were bold bad barons, who certainly were a terrible pest to their contemporaries, but whom we rather admire in the far perspective ; we do not forget the great historical families, whose largesses and whose crimes were on a splendid scale, whose petty jealousies and quarrels with each other were the ruin of peasants and the devastation of country-sides, but whose *noblesse oblige* had elements of heroism and sacrifice in it, even on account of the very fact of its meaning the maintenance of their own Order as against the world. We may readily concede that these people did some work that had to be done, we may allow that there was a certain poetry and creative power in it ; but what has all that to do with the modern Aristocracy ?

Of the 550 hereditary peers who to-day constitute the bulk of the House of Lords, it is very doubtful if a single one had a relative present at Runnymede and the signing of the Charter. It is said that only *five* can even

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trace their families back to that century. In the reign of Elizabeth the lay Lords numbered no more than sixty. Even the Stuarts, who lavished honours on the most dubious favourites, only increased the list of peers by about 100. It was—and the moral is easily drawn—in the reign of George III that the great growth of the modern peerage took place. George himself, anxious to strengthen his weak hand in the Government, insisted on nominating a large contingent—his congeners and equals in point of brains and education—a crass and fat, snuff-taking and port-wine-bibbing crew. William Pitt—and this was part of his settled policy—drowned out the old Whig families in the House of Lords “by pouring into it members of the middle and commercial class, who formed the basis of his political power—small landowners, bankers, merchants, nabobs, army-contractors, lawyers, soldiers, and seamen. It became the stronghold not of blood, but of property, the representative of the great estates and great fortunes which the vast increase of English wealth was building up.”* The whole process was a sort of strange counterblast to the French Revolution. But with Pitt's successors it continued to such an extent that

* J. R. Green, *Short History of the English People*, ch. x.

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actually the total number of peerages created during George the Third's reign was 388 ! *

And from that time forward the same. Britain, to accentuate her victory over Napoleon, and to assure the world of her anti-revolutionary principles, steadily added and added to her tale of titled heads : till now—instead of the feudal chiefs and royal boon-companions and buccaneers and sea-dogs of old days—we have a wonderful breccia of brewers and bankers, colliery owners and Stock Exchange magnates, newspaper proprietors, wine dealers, general manufacturers and industrial directors, among whom the old landlords lie embedded like fossils. † It must be confessed that whatever romance a title may have once carried with it has now quite gone. It is hardly possible, one would think, for the most Philistine Briton or world-foraging Yankee to perceive any glamour in the present aristocracy. Indeed, one may say that—although, of course, it includes some very worthy persons—a certain vulgarity attaches to the class as a whole, and that it is

* May's *Constitutional History*, vol. i. The number of baronets created during the same reign was 494 ! and of knights such a crowd that the order has never recovered from the somewhat aldermanic and provincial flavour it then acquired.

† Since 1800 the new peers created amount to 376 !