EDUCATION & THE LOWER CLASS

Upton Abbey: An Improvised Comedy of English Manors

Researched by,
Nicole Colangelo
INTRODUCTION

There were two primary paths children took during the late 19th and early 20th century: either going to public/private schools or instruction from a governess. Based on the younger generation, children would begin in primary school where they would memorize lessons, learn arithmetic, and perfect their penmanship (“What Was School Like?”). Primarily boys would then continue onto grammar school or an independent secondary school, followed by university. This was where we begin to see women’s admissions into secondary school institutions (Curtis, 170). In contrast, it was common for the upper-class women to have a governess. They would be taught what was needed for them to prosper in the world within the confines of their own home (Countess of Carnarvon, 34). Education at this time was largely in flux, and there were many different paths that the children took to enrich their minds and prepare for the future.

AN INTERESTING LINK

What Was School Like?

HISTORY OF BRITISH EDUCATION

Throughout the 19th Century, the education system in Britain was going through a large-scale evaluation and reform on both elementary and secondary schools. In 1861, the government created a commission, called the Clarendon commission after its leader, Lord Clarendon, to investigate a schools and their educational methods (Curtis, 150). This was in response to the many reports of children leaving their primary education with little to no understanding of the requirement materials. There were nine schools a part of the initial investigation: Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, Merchant Taylors, Rugby, Shrewbury, St. Paul’s, Westminster, and Winchester (Curtis, 150-151). Although most of the schools did not allow them access to their facilities, the committee was still able to pull together a report over a four year span through materials such as witness interviews and questionnaires sent to the headmasters. The commission primarily suggested to retain the classic subjects with the curriculum, add more modern subjects (such as natural science, mathematics and drawing) and when they are older allow the students to specialize in particular subjects (Curtis, 152-153). The act following the release of the commission’s report, The Public Schools Act of 1868, ignored almost all of the suggestions made by the committee.

During the investigation, there was only one grammar school which admitted women, Rishworth. At Rishworth, girls were admitted until they were 14 years old, while the boys stayed until they were 15 to prepare for university (Curtis, 160). Another positive for women’s education was the opening of Leeds Girls High School in 1876. The goal of the high school was “to establish and maintain a High Class Day School for the Girls of Leeds, which shall be to them what a Grammar School is to their brothers” (Curtis, 170). They wished to give girls the opportunity to further their education where the governmental structure naturally did not allow. In 1898, the charity commission amended the
phrasing of their endowment agreement to include all youths grammar schools to allow funding for grammar schools which accepted girls (Curtis, 170). This was the start of an advancement for women's educational rights.

In 1862, Robert Lowe, the vice president of the Education Department published the revised code in 1862 (Curtis, 254 - 258). The code was based off two conditions: attendance and test results (Curtis, 258).

The restrictions of this plan lessened over time. It wasn’t until 1904 that the government’s regulations were truly set to last well past the war in the Regulations for Secondary Schools (Curtis, 323). The four main subjects required to be taught were English language and literature, with geography and history, foreign language, mathematics and/or science, and drawing (Curtis, 323). This also included physical education for all students and for girls what is modernly referred to as home economics. The general required age for student’s education was in flux throughout this time as well. It wasn’t until 1893 that children were required to attend school up until the age of 11 and then in 1899 is was changed to 12 (Curtis, 283). Following the war, the Education Act of 1918 raised the final age of required school to 14 effecting the possibility of child labor (Curtis, 343). Less children were able to work young, between the ages 12-16, due to the increased required age of school.
The Governess painted by Richard Redgrave in 1844. It was originally titled The Poor Teacher. (“The Victorian Governess”)

The Governess held an interesting, uncertain position in the world, and this position is worth analyzing. A governess fit in neither with the upper nor lower class of 20th century society. As stated by historical journalist Sarah Warwick in her book titled Upstairs & Downstairs: The Illustrated Guide to the Read World of Downton Abbey, “A governess lived a particularly lonely life in these houses, belonging neither to the class of servants nor truly to the upper, leisured class” (Warwick, 29). A governess is more often than not a woman of high standing and education that fell during hard financial times (Warwick, 29). Swearing into celibacy was a major requirement in order to become a governess. A governess would not be allowed to marry until she left service (Goldan-Price, 10). The job of a governess was a long, lonely, but rewarding life.

The primary duties of the governess were to prepare the upper class girls for a life outside their current homes. Lessons would include topics such as “music, dancing, singing and sketching” (Countess of Carnarvon, 34). The exact lesson plans and expectations of the governess were normally set by the household, most likely by the mother. Languages would also play a large part in a child’s curriculum, such as French, German and Italian. The languages they learned were dependent upon the family’s needs. As stated by the granddaughter of a family friend of author Edith Wharton:

“Looking back at my own education, I have realized that the point was to be cultivated, rather than educated: French and German, and Italian
if possible, and companions of your own class and speech patterns, widely read, much poetry by heart, and an overall familiarity with European history, literature and art” (Goldman-Price, 4).

A young girl might have multiple governesses at any given time, each specializing in different subjects. For instance, during a girl’s childhood, she might have two governesses: one focused on her education in English and history, while another focused on French (Goldman-Price, 2). During their younger years, children were not allowed to eat at the formal dining table with the rest of the family (Warwick, 29). They were expected to eat with their tutors, nursemaid, governess or nanny (Warwick, 29). While this luxury was not given in all households, the governess may be gifted the opportunity to sit with the family at dinner next to the lowest ranking family member (Warwick, 101). However, this luxury was never offered when the family hosted a high ranking guest within their halls.

With each household setting the standards for education, one would often find sporadic levels of knowledge amongst the upper class (Goldman-Price, 3). Edith Wharton’s sister-in-law Mary Cadwalder Jones enrolled in school for a period of time following the death of her mother, but was sent home shortly upon her arrival despite her proficient knowledge of history and English, due to her dreadful understanding of mathematics (Goldman-Price, 3). While each particular governess created their own relationships with the family, more often than not the women created lasting relationships with their charges. They often continued to communicate following the end of their formal education. For instance, Beatrix Potter, the author of The Tale of Peter Rabbit, continued to communicate with her governess Annie Carter even after Carter left service to marry a civil engineer (Warwick, 18). A governess wasn’t just a teacher, but also a mentor to their charges.

In 1841, the Governesses’ Benevolent Association (GBA) was formed in the hopes to give support to the countries governesses (Curtis, 171). They would provide care for them once they retired from service since they had no family, husband, or children to support them. When the GBA developed the list of applicants, the association found that many of the governesses were unprepared for their position. With this in mind, the Queen’s College opened its doors for woman to be trained as Governesses in 1848 (Curtis, 171). Charlotte Mason, a famous woman teacher from the time, opened her school for governesses called the “House of Education” in 1892 in Ambleside (Curtis, 173). Charlotte Mason’s method was all about creating a life long learner rather than just teaching the students the topics. Education and training for a governess was on the rise and looking towards a brighter future.

SECONDARY EDUCATION

Secondary education was a luxury not everyone got the chance to have. More times than not, institutions at this level had high application and tuition costs making it impossible for boys and girls of the lower class to join. Schools at this level included grammar schools and independent institutions, such as Eton. Some of these schools did offer scholarships to children of the lower class with academic valor, but there were
few and often hard to achieve. Secondary education was not common for girls but began to become more prevalent in the late 19th century.

**EDUCATION AND THE WAR**

- 13,878 members of the Oxford community served in the Great War, 2,470 perished (“Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”)
- Gardens were encouraged in primary schools to help grow supplies, due to the large portion of supplies going to the front (Curtis, 340)
  - They picked wild fruits for jams (Curtis, 340)
  - For gas masks, horse-chestnuts
  - Temporary dimission during day for children to help with farming and agriculture
  - Play-centuries were created to keep children out of the streets (Curtis, 341)
- A medical researcher from Oxford traveled to the Western front and helped design the first gas mask (“Oxford & the Great War: Science and the War”)
- Shortly following the start of the war, Oxford was converted into a hospital while still having classes (“Oxford & the Great War: The War At Home”)
  - Due to the conversion of Summerville (one of the colleges allowing women), women were displaced to other colleges during the time. A wall was erected in the quade of Oriel Hall with women on one side and men on the other, to separate them while the men are recovering.
- The Education Act of 1918 (“The Great War and Education”)
- Also known as the Fisher Act
- President of the Board of Education: Herbert Fisher
- Changed the required school age was moved to 14 years old
- Employing kids under the age of 12 was made illegal

**INTERESTING LINKS OR DOCUMENTS**

- [Oxford & the Great War Documentaries](#) (25 mins)
- [The Great War and Education](#)

**LITERATURE OF THE TIME**

Here is a list of books published during or prior to that time period. If you have any questions on the book themselves feel free to ask me (“Books that Shaped America,” “English Literature,” “French Literature”).

- Any Shakespeare
  - *Midsummer Nights Dream* (1595)
  - *Romeo & Juliet* (1597)
- Any Jane Austen Novel
  - *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)
  - *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)
- *Frankenstein* (1818) Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley
- *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) Victor Hugo
- *Jane Eyre* (1847) Charlotte Bronte
- *Wuthering Heights* (1847) Emily Bronte
- *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) Nathaniel Hawthorne
- *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) Charles Dickens
- *Les Misérables* (1862) Victor Hugo
- *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) Lewis Carroll
- *Venus in Furs* (1870) Leopold von Sachermasoch
- *The Strange Case of a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) Robert Louis
- *Sherlock Holmes* (1887 and on) Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) Oscar Wilde
- *The Jungle Book* (1894) Rudyard Kipling
- *The Time Machine* (1895) H.G. Wells
- *Dracula* (1897) Bram Stoker
- *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) Henry James
- *Wizard of Oz* (1900 and on) L. Frank Baum
- *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901) Beatrix Potter
- *Heart of Darkness* (1902) Joseph Conrad
- *Call of the Wild* (1903) Jack London
• *The Jungle* (1906) Upton Sinclair
• *Return of the Soldier* (1918) Rebecca West

**REFERENCES**