

An American Exception:
Natural Aristocracy and the Idea of the Gentleman

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A desire for notice—to stand out from others—marks a characteristic human trait that emerges in various forms from Homer’s *Iliad* to the popular culture of the present day. What then confers the distinction that makes someone stand out? From the founding and early republic, Americans decisively rejected the legitimacy of hereditary distinctions and insisted upon a fundamental equality before the law. Thomas Jefferson drew upon a long tradition when he spoke in 1826 of “the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred ready to ride them legitimately by the grace of God.” Yet he had agreed with John Adams thirteen years earlier “that there is a natural aristocracy among men” grounded in virtue and talents. The concept of natural aristocracy in a republican polity shaped a distinctive idea of the gentleman defined by conduct and accomplishments rather than status alone that deeply influenced American culture into the twentieth century. Recovering it offers an alternative various kinds of base ambition Tocqueville detected in the 1840s or the culture of celebrity in the mass media age.

Jefferson’s took that famous phrase—about “that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred ready to ride them”—from Colonel Richard Rumbold, a Cromwellian soldier executed in 1685 for his party in the Rye House Plot. Rumbold spoke those words in a defiant speech from the gallows, and later authors quoted them in a variety of political and historical works that Jefferson and his contemporaries

would have known. More importantly, his phrase expressed a republican critique of hereditary privilege that resonated during the founding and early republican eras. James Fenimore Cooper, no egalitarian himself, later wrote that “aristocracies wound the sense of natural justice by placing men, altogether unworthy of trust in high hereditary situations” which both offended morals and damaged the public interest. Cooper, like Jefferson and even Rumbold, who expressed himself “satisfied that God hath wisely ordered different stations for men in the world,” accepted differences among men according to their talents and merit. Gaining the respect, and therefore deference, of others through the exercise of both talent and character marked the true criterion of natural rather than hereditary aristocracy.

Cooper viewed social station as mainly a consequence of property, but property alone did not make a gentleman in America. Property secured independence and the potential for influence through wealth and a recognized stake in the community. Realizing that potential demanded more as men like George Washington realized. William Blackstone had famously described the English as a polite and commercial people, and much the same could be said of eighteenth century Americans. Lord Chesterfield described politeness as “a superior gracefulness in all you say and do.” Samuel Johnson famously dismissed Chesterfield’s letters to his son as teaching “the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing master,” and Adam Smith pointed out in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that “to superficial minds, the vices of the great seem at all times agreeable.” Those points did not reject politeness as such, however, and but rather underlined the importance of virtue in aligning the forms of behavior with the essence of noble character. Particularly in America, virtue became a recurring eighteenth century theme that easily translated into a republican idiom from the 1770s.

Polite culture rested on the hierarchical foundation of emulating a patrician ethos, but the possibility of assimilation to it made for a relatively open elite: those who cultivated gentility had the ability to rise above their circumstances and become a gentleman. Montesquieu recognized the natural “desire of distinguishing ourselves” when he wrote that “it is pride that renders us polite: we feel a pleasing vanity in being remarked for a behavior that shows we have not been meanly born, and that we have not been bred up with those who in all ages have been considered the scum of the people.” Since politeness could be learned, not only in manners, but also through acquaintance with the arts and culture, it became a readily sought mark of what Americans called natural aristocracy. Just as societies passed from rudeness to refinement, so individuals acquired refinement through cultivating the politeness expected of a gentleman.

George Washington demonstrated a gentlemanly integrity and measured purposefulness that made him the archetype of natural aristocracy for Americans. From childhood, he devoted great effort to acquiring polite manners but developing the broader attributed of a gentleman.

Although Washington particularly stands out, Gordon Wood and other historians have described how the founding generation assimilated politeness and adapted the idea of the gentleman to Republican America. Colonial ambitions, however narrow, encompassed the aspiration of being recognized as a gentleman along with material gain and securing public office. The American Revolution and the early decades of the United States raised their sights and challenged their abilities. As David Ramsey pointed out in his 1789 history, the American Revolution “called forth many virtues and gave occasion for the display of abilities, which, but for that event, would have been lost to the world....It seemed as if the war not only required, but created talents.”

Much the same could be said of framing the Constitution and bringing it into operation. The desire for fame, no less than public duty, drove men who looked to English history and classical

antiquity for models of virtue. In doing so, they set examples of their own that later generations followed.

The idea of gentleman as exemplar of natural aristocracy proved both resilient and adaptable. Shaped by commercial society in the eighteenth century, it fit the aspirations of merchants and as well as planters and wealthy farmers. Professional men, especially lawyers and clergy, already fell within its scope. The backlash against revolution from 1789 strengthened it, while moral reform mainly reinforced the cultivation of virtue at the expense of no longer fashionable vice. Jacksonian Democracy presented a more serious challenge, but one that led many of its critics to refine their own outlook. Though not born to ride others or be ridden by them, men had natural differences sharpened by society that made some more worthy of distinction than others. Equality before law did not void the claim of superior talent and education. They would have looked back approvingly to Shaftesbury's view from the eighteenth century that "all politeness is owing to liberty," while pointing out that the leadership of natural aristocracy provided a check to democracy that secured liberty. Tyranny could be exercised by the many no less than by the one or the few.

James Fenimore Cooper offered a thoughtful defense of natural aristocracy in *The American Democrat* (1838) where he wrote of the social and political duties of an American gentleman. Not only did such men set the manners, taste and tone of society, encouraging civilization by their example, but they also bore the responsibility of guarding public liberties against demagogues and visionaries. Learning gave a gentleman a wider vision grounded in history, while economic independence protected against the temptation of servility. Interestingly, Cooper also wrote that the gentleman "has usually no pride in the mere vulgar consequences of wealth." That view takes as a given that wealth and property serve as a means of securing

independence rather than as an object in themselves. Politeness rather than possessions marked the determining characteristic.

Although nineteenth century Americans used the words “polite” and “politeness” less than their eighteenth century counterparts, the underlying assumption its broadest sense remained central to their understanding of the gentleman. Literature and the arts, even when disparaged the “little Latin and less Greek” of the cliché, dominated elite education in the South, and the high bourgeois of the Eastern seaboard also stressed the formative aspects of culture. Nicholas Biddle of Philadelphia exemplified the ideal, while George Ticknor, Edward Everett, and Samuel Morse worked to promote high culture in Boston and New York. Ticknor, as a founder of the Boston Public Library, promoted the wide circulation of its books to give poor citizens access to them. Both he and Everett promoted the humanistic tradition as a formative aspect of education. Learning joined with civility to form the habits of mind that defined an American gentleman.

Much later Andrew Lytle described the essence of a liberal education as graduating a Christian gentleman “who will go back home, or out into the world, and be what he is.” Not a trained specialist, but one “whose mind will presumably be a trained instrument which can respond to any kind of experience.” That capacity enables a gentleman to lead by example and also by exercising a judgment formed by more than his own immediate experiences. Education not only inculcates critical thought, but a sensibility and standards that make criticism an exercise in judgment rather than repudiation. That outlook dominated American most colleges and universities, particularly as many of them departed from the original purpose of training ministers to forming the character of an elite. Its influence persisted through the bourgeois period of United States history from about 1880 to 1955. The literary critic Henry Seidel Canby remarked in his memoirs that “many of the traits that had made the twentieth-century American

in business and the professions” sprang from the alumni of the old American colleges, who brought a “stabilizing of character and temperament, and also of prejudice.” Public culture benefited from that stabilizing influence through the tumultuous decades of the first half of the century, but after 1950 the ideal seemed increasingly threadbare. By the 1970s, it was gone with the wind.

What does all this mean? Is this just an exercise in nostalgia or recovering a past mentality than nobody has really missed? Recovering the idea of the gentleman as an American expression of natural aristocracy involves far more than delving into intellectual history. Behind Rumbold’s words that Jefferson found so compelling lay an important question. If men are not born to either subjection or superiority, what brings someone to accept the authority of another? The idea of the gentleman, and the politeness that defined it, provided an answer that successfully balanced democratic and aristocratic principles. Not only did it provide a measure for distinction that justified deference, but it also set a standard to which men might aspire. The standard itself limited the exercise of social authority and internalized restraint. In short, it provided ballast that stabilized American democracy.

Other measures for distinction exist, to be sure. Meritocracy has staked a claim since the 1960s, but that really means gathering credentials rather than accomplishing anything of real merit.

(Andrew Lytle’s remark that “it is customary to betray in the name of what is being betrayed”

rings particularly true with meritocracy.) Celebrity has even greater flaws in elevating the peculiar or shocking to the fifteen minutes of fame Andy Warhol believed everyone would have.

Perhaps a world we have forgotten deserves another look.

Samuel Johnson remarked of him: 'Other people have strange notions but they conceal them. If they have tails, they hide them; but Monboddo is as jealous of his tail as a squirrel.' Boswell, "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (p.230)