

Thomas Escott, *England: Her People, Polity, and Pursuits*, 1885

The era of the enlargement of English society dates from the Reform Bill of 1832, and if it has brought with it some contradictions, anomalies, and inconveniences, it has also been instrumental in the accomplishment of great and undoubted good. It has substituted, in a very large degree, the prestige of achievement for the prestige of position. The mere men of fashion, the fops, dandies, and exquisites, the glory of whose life was indolence, and who looked upon any thing in the way of occupation as a disgrace, have gone out of date never to return. . . .

Before the eventful year 1832, there existed a society in England very like the old exclusive society of Vienna. The chief and indeed almost only road to it lay through politics, and politics were for the most part a rigidly aristocratic profession. Occasionally men of the people made their way out of the crowd, and became personages in and out of the House of Commons; but most of the places under Government were in the hands of the great families, as also were the close boroughs, and the tendency was to fill each from among the young men of birth and fashion. The Reform Bill admitted an entirely new element into political life, and threw open the whole of the political area. A host of applicants for Parliamentary position at once came forward, and as a consequence the social citadel was carried by persons who had nothing to do with the purely aristocratic section which had hitherto been paramount. The patrician occupants of the captured stronghold, if they were somewhat taken aback by the blow which had been dealt them, accepted the situation and decided upon their future tactics with equal wisdom and promptitude. If the new-comers were to be successfully competed with, they saw that they must compete with them on the new ground, and must assert their power as the scions of no *fainéant* [note: *fading away*] aristocracy. The impulse given to the whole mass of the patriciate was immense, and the sum of the new-born or newly-displayed energies as surprising as it was satisfactory. The man of pleasure ceased to be the type to which it was expected, as a matter of course, that all those born in purple should conform.

The activity thus communicated directed itself into an infinite number of channels, and it has continued operative ever since. Our aristocrats of to-day are at least fired by a robust ambition. Many of them take up statesmanship as the business of their lives, and work at its routine duties as if it were necessary to the support of existence. Those whose tastes do not incline them in the direction of the senate, write books, paint pictures, or carve statues.

Perhaps, even probably, they are of a theatrical turn, and subsidize a theater, or even manage a company. They go into business, or they dedicate their existence to agricultural enterprise. At least they do something. Society, in fact, has bidden adieu to its ideal of glided and inglorious ease, and in strict conformity with the spirit of its new departure, selects its protégé and favorites upon a new principle. The question asked about any new aspirant to its freedom is not only, who is he, or how much has he a year, but, in addition, what has he done? and what can he do? The heroes and lions of society are not handsome young men, who can do nothing more than dress well, or dance well. They are seldom even those whose fame is limited to the hunting-field or the battle. They are men who have striven to solve the secret of the ice-bound pole, who have tramped right across the and sands of a strange continent, who have scaled heights previously deemed inaccessible, who have written clever books, painted great pictures, done great deeds, in one shape or other. It is surely a considerable social advance to have substituted for the exquisites of a bygone period, as]deals of life for the rising generation, men who have followed in the track of Xenophon, or who have been the pioneers of civilization on a continent. . . .

The degrees of esteem allotted to the different English professions are exactly what might be expected in a society organized upon such a basis and conscious of such aims. Roughly it may be said professions in England are valued according to their stability, their remunerativeness, their influence and their recognition by the State. These conditions may partially explain the difference which English society draws between the callings of the merchant and the stock-broker. Stock-brokers make immense fortunes; but there attaches to them a suspicion of precariousness infinitely in excess of that which, in some degree or other, necessarily attaches to all fortunes accumulated in commerce or trade. The merchant represents an interest which is almost deserving of a place among the estates of the realm, and with the development of which the prosperity and prestige of England are bound up. His house of business is practically a public institution, and the speculative element-the fluctuation of prices and the uncertainty of markets-enters as little as possible into it. Merchants have from time immemorial been the friends and supporters of monarchs-have taken their place in the popular chamber of the legislature, have been elevated to distinguished stations among the titular aristocracy of the land. We have had not only our merchant-princes, but our merchant-peers and merchant-statesmen. The calling has been recognized in our social hierarchy for centuries, and if not exactly a liberal, is an eminently respectable and dignified profession. Nor is the

merchant, as a rule, so much absorbed in the affairs of his own business as to be unable to devote as much time as is necessary to the pursuits of society and the affairs of the country. His operations run in a comparatively equal and tranquil channel, and to hint that he lives in an atmosphere of feverish excitement is equivalent to insinuating a doubt of his solvency. It is different with the stock-broker, whose social position is so sudden that it cannot yet be looked upon as assured-whose wealth, though great, has the garish hue of luck, and the glories associated with which may dissolve themselves at any moment into thin air, like Aladdin's palace, and who himself is popularly supposed to be more or less on the tenter-hooks of expectation and anxiety from morning to night. The merchant drives to his place of business in a family brougham or barouche [*note: types of horse-drawn carriage*]; the stock-broker drives to the station, where he takes the morning express to the City, in a smart dog-cart, with a high-stepping horse between the shafts, and a very knowing-looking groom at his side.

Such, at least, is the conception formed by the public of the two men of business, and it indicates not incorrectly the corresponding view of English society. The British merchant, as has been said, is very probably a member of Parliament; the instances in which stock-brokers are members of Parliament at the present day might be counted as something less than the fingers of one hand. The life of the ideal stock-broker is one of display; that of the ideal merchant, one of dignified grandeur or opulent comfort. Possessed of a certain amount of education, often acquired at a public school, sometimes both at Eton and Oxford, the stock-broker of the period has decided social aspirations. He makes his money easily, and he spends it lightly in procuring all the luxuries of existence. He marries a handsome wife, sets up a showy establishment, lays in a stock of choice wines, hires a French cook; he has carriages and horses, a box at the opera, stalls at theaters and concerts innumerable. He belongs to one or two good though not always first-rate clubs. He has acquaintances in the highest circles, and congratulates himself on being in society.