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Comment on Cookson — The Boarding School In A Canadian Context

The stages of boarding-school life described by Peter Cookson while in apparent reference to the United States, have greater applicability. The concept of boarding as an integral part of school life, which forms the basis of Cookson's essay, only emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Although American historians of boys' education such as James McLachlan make concerted efforts to demonstrate the existence of an indigenous boarding tradition "independent" of a much more influential British tradition, even they acknowledge that the growth of boarding schools in the United States in the critical years, 1880-1914, was due in large part to the tremendous popularity of these schools in Great Britain.[1] Not only was American Anglophilia "intense," to use McLachlan's phrase, but schools in both countries were characterized by identical terminology and dependence on Anglican theology.[2]

The rise of boys' boarding education in Britain had grown out of the Industrial Revolution.[3] During the first half of the nineteenth century internal reform of a few long-established "great" schools, long a bastion of the upper class, coincided with the growth of a large new middle group anxious to use its material wealth to achieve social acceptability. As railroads facilitated travel and admission pressures intensified on the "great" schools, additional institutions were founded. From the start the emphasis was on replication. Each new school had to promise anxious parents an education comparable to that of the "great" schools and so equally able to endow their male offspring with the requisites of social status as a "gentleman". These "public" schools, as they became known, were able to multiply so rapidly in Britain and across the English-speaking world precisely because no innovation was expected or even permissible.

Canadian boarding schools, like their American counterparts, were strongly influenced by the British phenomenon. In the late nineteenth century the earlier reliance on private homes to house pupils coming from a distance was largely replaced by boarding in the school. Toronto's Upper Canada College, founded in 1829 as a provincial grammar school, had always contained some British elements alongside its dominantly Canadian ethos. Concerted emulation of the British "public" school began only in 1895 under the headship of George Parkin, a Maritimer who in his youth embraced the British ideal with all the zeal of the convert. According to the school historian, Parkin was completely committed to private fee-based education and even opposed to common schooling: "Parkin believed that universal education meant that quality was sacrificed to quantity. It was only in the best private schools, Parkin thought, that quality education could still be found."[4]

Other Ontario schools also began to emphasize their reliance on British precept. Trinity College School, begun a fairly modest Anglican Church school before "public" boarding schools became

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fashionable in Britain, was by 1910 claiming that "the object of the founders of the School was to furnish a first class education on the general lines of the great Public Schools of England."[5]

New boarding schools were created in the years 1880-1914 in direct or indirect replication of the British model. St. Andrew's College was, for instance, founded in 1899 by leading members of the Presbyterian Church in Ontario in the Canadian Scottish tradition.[6] Despite such judicious modifications as the division of pupils into "clans" rather than the "houses" used in British schools, contemporaries were not deceived. As recollected by a pupil of 1910, like Upper Canada College, it was "modelled on the English public school."[7]

Of the other areas of Canada in which boys' boarding schools flourished, the most important was British Columbia.[8] Their impetus in that coastal province derived not from their earlier counterparts in Ontario or elsewhere in Canada but directly from Britain. In the years of mass immigration between 1900 and 1914, the province's population expanded largely through the arrival of settlers from Britain. Among new British Columbians were many "gentlemen emigrants," Britons of upper-middle or upper-class status who came largely because their social ambition outweighed economic prospects at home. Many brought offspring in need of education; others sought suitable employment. The consequence was the foundation of some three dozen boys' schools on the British model. Their headmasters were enterprising immigrants themselves "publicly" educated and early clientele largely the offspring of gentlemen emigrants. While some of these schools, particularly in the genteel provincial capital of Victoria, accepted day boys, they all assumed the primacy of boarding.

The rise of boarding education, whether in Britain, Canada or the United States, had a single basis. Just as Britain's new capitalist class created out of the Industrial Revolution sought to ensure for its male offspring gentlemanly, or upper-middle-class, status, so North Americans with economic resources were concerned that their sons received an education suitably differentiating them from the mass of the population. The emphasis placed on boarding was not unrelated to the Victorian notion of sin. Man was born with a predisposition to choose evil over good, but could through judicious oversight be taught otherwise. General agreement existed that the best years for "moulding character," to use the contemporary phrase, were from about seven to fifteen. The more complete attention given a boy when young the more likely he would be to take right action, "play the game," put the interests of his group, or social class, over personal desires. A boarding school could best assure results through its careful regulation of each day's time, restriction of contact to exemplars embodying correct character traits, and systematic use of positive and negative coercion to reward or punish behaviour. Parents who sent offspring to boarding school were inherently conservative: they wanted their sons to learn to conform, to take a reasonable place — perhaps one of leadership — in the socio-economic class to which their families either belonged or aspired.

While boarding education has undergone significant change in the last half century, the rationale for its existence has not greatly changed. Emphasis now may be more on academic than social exclusivity, but the reality remains that the appeal of both private boarding and day schools is principally to families with economic resources desiring for their offspring a future separate from — and perhaps superior to — the overwhelming majority of their age cohort.[9] Popular Canadian studies like John Porter's *Veritcal Mosaic* and Peter Newman's *Canadian Establishment* confirm for parents with aspirations for their sons the extent to which such education is still coterminous with high socio-economic status.[10]

Cookson's concern is to explain, largely through examining the secondary literature, the process by which pupils in boarding school are brought to identify with the school's priorities and goals.

While he seeks to place his explanation in a distinctly American context, his model involved few or no factors that are unique to the United States. Readers can examine the validity of his thesis also in the context of Canada, Britain or, indeed, most other cultures in which boarding schools have flourished.

Notes

[1] McLachlan, *American Boarding Schools: A Historical Study* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1970), p. 255.

[2] McLachlan, esp. pp. 155-56, 203-04, 226, 254-55.

[3] On the rise of "public" education in Britain, see esp. J.R. de S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: The Development of the Victorian Public School* (London: Millington, 1977), Brian Simon, *The Two Nations & the Educational Structure, 1780-1870* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, rep. 1981), and his *Education & the Labour Movement, 1870-1920* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980).

[4] Richard B. Howard, *Upper Canada College, 1829-1979* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979), p. 167.

[5] "Communicated," "Trinity College School, Port Hope," pp. 214-216 in J. George Hodgins, *The Establishment of Schools and Colleges in Ontario, 1792-1920* (Toronto, L.K. Cameron, 1910), vol. 2.

[6] See Carolyn Gossage, *A Question of Privilege: Canada's Independent Schools* (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1977), pp. 166-169.

[7] Vincent Massey, *What's Past is Prologue* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1963), p. 14.

[8] For detail, see Jean Barman, "Marching to Different Drummers: Public Education and Private Schools in British Columbia, 1900-1950," *B.C. Historical News* 14, 1 (Fall 1980), pp. 2-11, and her "Growing Up British in British Columbia: The Vernon Preparatory School, 1914-1946," pp. 119-138 in *Schooling and Society in 20th Century British Columbia,* ed. J. Donald Wilson and David C. Jones (Calgary: Detselig, 1980).

[9] On change in Britain, see John Rae, *The Public School Revolution* (London: Farber & Farber, 1981).

[10] Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965, and Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975.