

## GENTLEMANLY POLITENESS AND MANLY SIMPLICITY IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND\*

By John Tosh

**ABSTRACT.** Between the late eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century the notion of the 'polite gentleman' lost its political purchase. 'Manliness' became the identifying code of both the business class and the 'respectable' working class. The virtues of rugged individualism and personal integrity were emphasised at the expense of sociability and ease of manner. In the political sphere debates about who should be included in the franchise were permeated by the language of manliness, and the politicians with the greatest popular following were hailed as 'plain men' possessing a 'simple manliness'.

POLITENESS is not a quality we readily associate with Victorian men. In the light of the received picture of sober, dutiful earnestness, it strikes a trivial and anachronistic note. If Gladstone or Mill can be counted as 'polite' we feel that this was a superficial accomplishment, revealing little of the individual or the cultural values he espoused. Unlike the Georgians, the Victorians had little invested in the social virtues of politeness. The first casualty of the new seriousness was that paragon of Regency fashion, the dandy – the man who lived for appearances.<sup>1</sup> Fenimore Cooper reported in 1837 that the English dandy was no more: 'the men, as a whole, are simple, masculine in manner and mind'.<sup>2</sup> The second casualty was the conduct book – the dominant genre of advice literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – now supplanted by the etiquette manual. Whereas the conduct book had taught manners in a fundamentally moral framework, the etiquette book reduced the perplexities of behaviour in company to strict conformity to fashion. Viewed through the lens of etiquette, politeness was no more than a mask to facilitate and conceal the

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<sup>1</sup>Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (1981); Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerholm* (1960).

<sup>2</sup>J. Fenimore Cooper, *England* (1837), 195.

ambition of the social climber.<sup>3</sup> The idea of polite society, it appeared, had lost its power to civilise.

This contrast between Georgians and Victorians is so familiar that we may lose sight of there being something to explain. But it is not immediately obvious why politeness should have been so little esteemed by the Victorians. Those with a 'position' in society certainly valued progress in manners and refinement, while at the same time being disturbed by social climbing on an unprecedented scale. But beyond the ranks of 'polite society' politeness had diminishing leverage. Its place as a marker of social and political virtue was taken by 'manliness', defined in terms which emphasised the departure from polite standards. My purpose in this paper is to analyse this process, in a necessarily somewhat schematic way, given the lack of detailed research in this area. My aim is to suggest a way forward by juxtaposing the consensus which has begun to emerge on eighteenth-century politeness with the very uneven literature on manliness during the early and mid-Victorian period.

The most familiar approach to the decline of politeness is to treat it as a shift in the culture of the governing elite. Lord Ashley (later the seventh earl of Shaftesbury) succinctly identified the trend in 1844. Visiting Rugby School with his son's future in mind, he reflected on the poor light in which it placed Eton, the obvious choice for a man of his rank:

I fear Eton . . . It makes admirable gentlemen and finished scholars – fits a man, beyond all competition, for the dining-room, the Club, St James's Street, and all the mysteries of social elegance; but it does not make the man required for the coming generation. We must have nobler, deeper, and sterner stuff; less of refinement and more of truth; more of the inward, not so much of the outward, gentleman.<sup>4</sup>

While Eton had changed little over the previous half-century, Rugby had experienced a transformation. Thomas Arnold (who had died two years earlier) had placed Rugby at the forefront of the reforming movement in the public schools. The school was now a by-word for 'serious' education, in which moral tone and a sense of demanding vocation in life were the preeminent goals. In short, Rugby promised that attention to the 'inward gentleman' which Ashley was looking for.

Of course the contrast with Eton expressed much more than a choice

<sup>3</sup>Michael Curtin, *Propriety and Position: A Study of Victorian Manners* (New York, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>Lord Ashley, diary for 21 Nov. 1844, quoted in Edwin Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury* (2 vols., 1886), II, 77.

of schools. Arnold's achievement at Rugby represented one of the most significant fruits of the reform of manners since it began to impinge seriously on the propertied classes in the 1790s. And like the Evangelicals, Arnold had little time for the niceties of refined society. He had more weighty things on his mind. 'Gentlemanly conduct' featured second among Arnold's goals (after 'religious and moral principles' and before 'intellectual ability'), but he meant by that the translation of sound religion into action, not the perpetuation of a social code.<sup>5</sup> For Arnold the sense of pressing tasks to be accomplished allowed no time for leisure or sociability. One of his most devoted followers, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, confessed to an impatience with those who did not 'take life in earnest'; 'I want a sign, which one catches as by a sort of masonry, that a man knows what he is about in life – whither tending, and in what cause he is engaged.'<sup>6</sup> The implication was that he would not find it in polite society. This was the new gentlemanliness: extending far beyond the Evangelical circles in which it had begun, it became the characteristic mind-set of many in public service and political life. It might be described as the moral rearmament of the Victorian governing classes.

The limitation of this line of analysis is that it relates to only a tiny elite. In Arnold's time there were nine recognised public schools. The appearance of a further thirty-two schools between 1840 and 1860 represented a crucial phase in the development of the modern public school.<sup>7</sup> But this growth in absolute terms has masked the fact that the public schools continued to draw upon a very constricted social base. There was significant recruitment from the ranks of the professions, in addition to the traditional landed and clerical classes, but in this period the public schools made virtually no impact on manufacturing and commerce which accounted for the majority of the middle class, including its 'coming men'. In order to register their concerns, we must turn to the alternative models of masculinity current among the non-gentle classes. These occasioned less debate at the time, and have attracted correspondingly less attention from modern historians, but their social reach was considerably greater.

A striking illustration comes from Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *North and South*, of 1855. During an exchange between the vicar's daughter, Margaret Hale, and the mill-owner, John Thornton, Margaret remarks that to her mind the term 'gentleman' subsumes what John appears to mean by a 'true man'. John turns her proposition on its head:

<sup>5</sup> A. P. Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* (8th edn, 2 vols., 1858), 1, 100.

<sup>6</sup> A. P. Stanley, quoted in James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca, 1995), 61.

<sup>7</sup> Figures from J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (1954), 228–9.

I take it that 'gentleman' is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as 'a man,' we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself – to life – to time – to eternity.

For John Thornton gentlemanliness is other-related in the negative sense of being caught up in considerations of status and appearance, whereas manliness has to do with interiority and authenticity; he applauds what he calls 'the full simplicity of the noun "man"'.<sup>8</sup> There is a resonance here with Ashley's inner man, defined by 'character' rather than the siren call of worldly reputation. There is also a comparable weight given to work. However, what drives John Thornton is not the elevated calling of the Evangelicals, but the single-minded attention to making money which has brought him from inauspicious beginnings as the son of a bankrupt and suicide, to be a prominent Manchester manufacturer. He speaks for the new entrepreneurial class of early Victorian England who neither claimed nor received the title of 'gentleman'. The standard by which they asked to be judged was 'manliness'.

My contention in this paper is that manliness and gentlemanliness were sharply distinguished in the early and mid-Victorian period, and that much of this distinction turned on their relation to politeness. While 'gentlemen' continued to value a certain refinement and sociability, manliness spoke to the virtues of rugged individualism, and this style of masculinity gained in social and political weight as the century proceeded. Politeness was a critical fault-line between the gentlemanly and manly ideals. It summed up the exclusiveness and affluence of the former, in contrast to the open and unhierarchical character of the latter. One could be born a gentleman – in fact gentle birth gave one a clear edge in status over other brands of gentleman.<sup>9</sup> Manliness, on the other hand, was socially inclusive. Birth, breeding and education were secondary, compared with the moral qualities which marked the truly manly character. Manliness had to be earned, by mastering the circumstances of life and thus securing the respect of one's peers. It lay within the grasp of every man who practised self-help with single-minded discipline.

The association between politeness and gentlemanly status remained close. An exception was often made in the case of country squires who were said to make up in moral sturdiness what they lacked in polish –

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1855), ch. 20 ('Men and Gentlemen').

<sup>9</sup> 'A gentleman by birth remained a cut above other gentlemen': Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot* (1981), 263.

a social type that was certainly not new to the Victorians.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise 'politeness' continued to be synonymous with 'breeding' and leisure: polite behaviour remained the surest indicator of breeding and the indispensable lubricant of sociability. Opinions differed about how much weight should be attached to politeness, just as they differed with regard to the salience of birth or morality in the gentlemanly ideal. The advice books tended to claim more for politeness than daily experience was likely to bear out: to assert, in the words of one didactic writer, that politeness was 'the result of the combined action of all the moral and social feelings, guided by judgment and refined by taste',<sup>11</sup> went well beyond common understanding of the word. James Fitzjames Stephen took a more cynical view: 'when we speak of a gentleman', he remarked, 'we do not mean either a good man, or a wise man, but a man socially pleasant'.<sup>12</sup> But whether merely pleasant or intimating moral worth, politeness was the hall-mark of the gentleman.

Manliness is an even more slippery concept. In nineteenth-century England the word was used in an extraordinary variety of contexts and it was repeatedly pushed in fresh directions by religious writers and social theorists, often in mutually inconsistent ways. In the name of manliness Victorian men were urged to work, to pray, to stand up for their rights, to turn the other cheek, to sow wild oats, to be chaste and so on. It is clear that the idea of manliness exercised a powerful hold over the Victorians, but the nature of that hold has been obscured by recent scholarship. One strand treats manliness as the special province of the public schools, with headmasters cast in the role of expert.<sup>13</sup> The other dominant approach, by resurrecting some of the more eccentric versions of the Tractarians, the Evangelicals and the muscular Christians, has created the misleading impression that manliness was a matter of applied theology.<sup>14</sup> But manliness was more than a subject of learned disputation, more even than an educational tool; it was a guide to life, deeply rooted in popular culture, and often resistant to the redefinitions proposed by didactic writers.

Viewed as an aspect of the 'common sense' of social relations, manliness comprised a set of core values which had characterised masculine culture long before the Victorians. The main thrust is

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (1995), 325–9.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Duncan, *The Gentleman's Book of Manners or Etiquette* (1875), 7.

<sup>12</sup> [James Fitzjames Stephen], 'Gentlemen', *Cornhill Magazine*, 5 (1862), 331.

<sup>13</sup> David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning* (1961), 195–227; J. R. de S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: The Development of the Victorian Public School* (1977).

<sup>14</sup> Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge, 1985); Boyd Hilton, 'Manliness, Masculinity and the Mid-Victorian Temperament', in *The Blind Victorian: Henry Fawcett and British Liberalism*, ed. L. Goldman (Cambridge, 1989), 60–70; David Alderson, *Mansex Fine: Religion, Manliness and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Manchester, 1998).

accurately conveyed by the *Oxford English Dictionary* which gives ‘the possession of manly vigour’ before ‘those virtues characteristic of a man’. Manly vigour included energy, virility, strength – all the attributes which equipped a man to place his physical stamp on the world. Next came the moral qualities which enabled men to attain their physical potential – decisiveness, courage and endurance. These virtues had traditionally had a strong military resonance; now they were considered applicable as much to the struggle of life as to the battlefield. These qualities of physique and character – what Carlyle called ‘toughness of muscle’ and ‘toughness of heart’<sup>15</sup> – were in turn yoked to some notion of social responsibility – whether loyalty to one’s peers or chivalry towards women. The desired outcome was the ‘independent man’ – one who was beholden to no one, who kept his own counsel and who ruled his own household. These were the English characteristics which Hippolyte Taine summarised in the 1860s as ‘the need for independence, the capacity for initiative, the active and obstinate will’.<sup>16</sup>

One other attribute was critically important in distinguishing manliness from gentlemanliness: frank straightforwardness, not only in action (about which there could be no disagreement in principle), but also in speech. The touchstone of polite conversation was the anticipated impression made on the listener. The manly man was someone who paid more attention to the promptings of his inner self than to the dictates of social expectation. Manly speech was therefore direct, honest and succinct. Its purpose was not to please, or to shield listeners from the disagreeable, but to convey meaning without equivocation. The result might not be ‘socially pleasant’. It came from the heart, unbridled by fear of reprisal or ridicule. What James Fitzjames Stephen called ‘plain, downright, frank simplicity’ was ‘the outward and visible sign of the two great cognate virtues – truth and courage’.<sup>17</sup> It was also the outward sign of ‘independence’, since conformity in speech was the most telling indication of subservience or deference. Directness and sincerity might well cross the boundary of propriety and appear brusque or even rude. When a man had nothing to say from the heart, the right course was silence. Hence, in complete distinction from the conventions of politeness, manliness often meant taciturnity. Here again it is hard to avoid quoting Carlyle. Manliness was for him exemplified by the man of action, the man of few words: he hailed ‘the silent English’<sup>18</sup> and Oliver Cromwell as the ‘emblem of the dumb English’.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Oxford, 1934), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Hippolyte Taine, *Notes on England*, trans. E. Hyams (1957), 268.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen, ‘Gentlemen’, 336.

<sup>18</sup> Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (1998), 286.

No question here of allowing one's conversation to be moulded by ladies.

Robin Gilmour has written of manliness as 'a key Victorian concept', connoting 'a new openness and directness, a new sincerity in social relations'.<sup>20</sup> He overestimates its novelty. Since the days of Addison and Steele objections to the artificiality inherent in polite manners had been cast in terms of an appeal to honesty and authenticity. Taciturnity verging on the brusque had long been considered by foreign visitors to be an English trait.<sup>21</sup> The virtues of 'sincerity' had been a major theme of social moralists in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. With different emphases, both Gerald Newman and Michèle Cohen have shown how the rise of sincerity was a reaction against the indiscriminate imitation of fine manners by social climbers in mid-eighteenth-century urban society, and how it became subsumed in a redefinition of Englishness.<sup>22</sup> What was new in the mid-nineteenth century was the consolidation of sincerity into the dominant gender ideal for middle-class men. This was the ideal of 'manly simplicity', continuously reinforced by general precept and commended in the lives of individual men.<sup>23</sup> Here was the very antithesis of the refinement and artifice of polite society.

Reporting on a visit she had received in 1853 from Charles Kingsley, the proponent of muscular Christianity, Elizabeth Barrett Browning found herself pleasantly surprised: she had steeled herself to receive a manly person of the type she detested, but instead encountered geniality and 'almost tender kindness'. Barrett Browning was measuring Kingsley not against his own rarified vision of divine manhood, but by the standards of manliness as commonly understood.<sup>24</sup> Energy, assertiveness, independence, directness and simplicity were its core attributes. They were manifest less in formal treatises than in the texture of social existence. They were certainly much older than the nineteenth century. Interestingly, in a recent attempt to distill the essence of manliness as a Western cultural tradition, Harvey Mansfield stresses its individual quality, biased in favour of action, and characterised by struggle, Stoicism and independence.<sup>25</sup> These characteristics can be confirmed

<sup>20</sup> Gilmour, *Idea of the Gentleman*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650–1850* (Oxford, 2000), 306–9.

<sup>22</sup> Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740–1830* (New York, 1997), 128–55; Michèle Cohen, 'Manliness, Effeminacy and the French: Gender and the Construction of National Character in Eighteenth-Century England', in *English Masculinities, 1660–1800*, ed. T. Hitchcock and M. Cohen (1999), 44–61.

<sup>23</sup> David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends* (1966), 59; Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning*, 195–6; Gilmour, *Idea of the Gentleman*, 58, 69.

<sup>24</sup> *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. F. G. Kenyon (2 vols., 1897), II, 134.

<sup>25</sup> Harvey Mansfield, 'The Partial Eclipse of Manliness', *TLS*, 17 July 1998.

again and again in the best-selling novelists of the Victorian period, Trollope and Wilkie Collins being perhaps the clearest guides.<sup>26</sup>

The cultural prestige of these manly ideals must be seen in the context of the increasing irrelevance of politeness. In several crucial respects, it had become redundant. Eighteenth-century politeness had expressed a faith in the improving effects of leisure, sociability and social mixing between the sexes. But each of these was downplayed in the social perspective of the Victorians. Leisure was the most fundamental precondition of politeness, the mark of the gentleman being either a man living on private means, or someone on whom business did not weigh too heavily. The squire drawing rent from his tenant farmers, the rentier living off investments, the man of letters and the professional with some private capital behind him – all could be accommodated to the traditional model of the leisured gentleman who valued sociability both for its own sake and as a means of contributing to the public good. The emphasis among the Victorian middle class was different. For men who had built up a business from small beginnings or had made their way up a professional ladder, the demands of work loomed much larger. Leisure often amounted to no more than a few snatched moments away from factory or counting-house. Lives were disfigured by excessive attention to business. The mill-owner Isaac Holden was continually distracted from the company of his wife and from the claims of the Methodist community by his ‘dear old combing machines’; he appears to have taken all too literally the newly minted motto of the town of Bradford, *Labor vincit omnia* (work overcomes everything).<sup>27</sup> Edward Benson, the first head of Wellington College, filled every hour of the day with work: any time left over from his official duties was devoted to a lifelong scholarly study of the Early Church father, St Cyprian.<sup>28</sup> In their different ways both men shared the profound belief that self-realisation comes from purposeful work, not from the enjoyment of society.

The conditions for men’s sociability had also altered. The rationale of eighteenth-century politeness had been to counter social and sectarian division through the civilising effects of company: hence the high value placed on the arts of conversation, guided by restraint of the self and

<sup>26</sup> On Trollope, see Gilmour, *Idea of the Gentleman*; on Collins, see Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), 223–6; Alderson, *Mansex Fine*, 62–4.

<sup>27</sup> John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (1999), 76–7.

<sup>28</sup> David Newsome, *History of Wellington College* (1959), 92, 151.

respect for others.<sup>29</sup> In Victorian society, on the other hand, individualism counted for more than sociability. This was partly a reflection of the competitive conditions in which businessmen and professional men worked. Self-improvement, instead of depending on the leavening effect of polite society, was seen as a solitary endeavour. Not surprisingly the institutions of male sociability were at a low ebb during this period. There were fewer clubs in London than there had been in the eighteenth century, or than there would be after about 1870, and in other cities clubs were slow to develop.<sup>30</sup>

Judged against the requirements of politeness, these clubs offered a problematic form of sociability, in that their membership was confined to men. The civilising properties of women had been especially valued in the hey-day of politeness. Assembly rooms, public balls and theatres had encouraged relations of easy informality between the sexes, allowing the rough edges of masculine behaviour to be smoothed down. By the 1830s the assembly rooms were in decline. The associational life of men and women tended to run in separate grooves – for example in philanthropy where men and women staked out their distinctive responsibilities, with their own organising committees.<sup>31</sup> The only context in which easy relations between the sexes were applauded without qualification was the family, where the demands of domesticity on men were pitched at a higher level during the early and mid-Victorian period than at any time before or since. Domesticity is commonly associated with the Evangelicals, who redefined the home as the site of spiritual exercises and the shrine of angelic womanhood.<sup>32</sup> In fact only a minority fully subscribed to the views of Hannah More and John Angell James, but the Evangelicals were nevertheless running with the spirit of the times rather than against it. Shorn of its religious hyperbole, their notion of domesticity became the accepted wisdom of the respectable classes. Home was experienced as a vital refuge from the alienation of the market and from the degradation of urban life; or in James Anthony Froude's words, as a respite from 'the struggle in the race of the world'.<sup>33</sup>

Yet the sociability offered by domesticity was essentially private. Social intercourse with neighbours was not casual and spontaneous,

<sup>29</sup> John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (1997), 99–112.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580–1800* (Oxford, 2000); Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (1978), ch. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Oxford, 1986), 436–45; F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>32</sup> See Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, chs. 1–2; and Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 34–9.

<sup>33</sup> [J. A. Froude], *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849), 113.

but increasingly regulated by invitation and calling rituals. Home offered middle-class men not so much a route into neighbourhood society as a substitute for it. Moreover, the authority vested in the head of the household – and the priority accorded to his needs – meant that his interaction with wife and children was not likely to be easy or equal. All too often growing boys were given by their parents a very discouraging model of intellectual companionship. For that growing proportion of middle-class boys who were sent away to boarding school, this negative impression was intensified by exposure to the casual misogyny of all-male institutions.<sup>34</sup> The ability to relate to members of the opposite sex on terms of equality was much less common among the Victorian middle class than their Georgian predecessors.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas politeness was increasingly redundant and irrelevant, the core values of manliness directly addressed the middle-class life experience. This was true in three respects particularly. Manliness exemplified the polarised conception of sexual character which underpinned the tendency of Victorian men and women to seek the company of their own sex; it fully validated the work ethic; and it set standards of self-discipline for men who faced life as embattled individuals.

Victorian manliness was premised on a powerful sense of the feminine ‘other’, with each sex being defined by negative stereotypes of the other. The separation of the sexes was not of course just an over-literal reflection of natural difference; it was the outcome of a powerful discursive trend over the previous century which is familiar from the work of Thomas Laqueur. According to his book *Making Sex* a transformation in biological thought occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from sexual difference understood in incremental terms, to a two-sex model which exaggerated the anatomical differences between the two sexes. Women were now typecast as sexually passive, men as consumed by an all-powerful libido.<sup>36</sup> Whatever objections to Laqueur’s thesis in relation to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is little dispute that early nineteenth-century medicine emphasised the biological differences between men and women to a greater extent than ever before. With this came an exaggeration of secondary differences, particularly as regards sexual character. Manly independence was dramatised by feminine dependence, manly action by feminine passivity, and so on. Both body and

<sup>34</sup> This point was repeatedly made by women didactic writers. See for example: Sarah Lewis, *Woman’s Mission* (7th edn, 1840), 32, and Sarah Ellis, *The Mothers of England* (1843), 77.

<sup>35</sup> Tosh, *A Man’s Place*, 107–10.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

mind were now sexed.<sup>37</sup> As the educational reformer Emily Davies sadly noted, 'whatever is manly must be unwomanly, and vice versa', leading to 'the double moral code, with its masculine and feminine virtues'.<sup>38</sup> Manliness claimed the active virtues for men, naturalising the privilege by dwelling on their female opposites: dependence, caprice, emotionality and timorousness. All too many of both sexes were fully convinced that the attributes of manliness were either natural or God-given. Hence the charge of effeminacy was more damaging than ever, and for this reason it was perhaps less often levelled than in the past.

Logically the implication of this must be that manliness was exclusive to men. In actual fact women were occasionally described as 'manly', suggesting some confusion between what was human and what was specific to the male sex. Yet, applied to women, 'manly' was a rare complement, and they were doomed always to fall short of total achievement. Thus when Samuel Smiles addressed the writer Eliza Lynn Linton as 'beloved woman, most manly of your sex', he meant that she had surpassed the capacities of women, not that she equalled those of men.<sup>39</sup> The only exponents of manliness who believed that women were on an equal footing with men were writers from the Evangelical camp: the subsuming of manliness in the Christian virtues clearly had androgynous implications, as Claudia Nelson has demonstrated.<sup>40</sup> But common usage respected the assumed polarity between male and female. Manliness was as much to do with separating from the feminine as with affirming the masculine. This sense of a yawning gender divide was reinforced by education: while the promise of intellectual achievement was always extended to middle-class boys (however patchy the actual provision), their sisters were all too likely to be trained in 'accomplishments' which confirmed their inferior standing. The outcome was a significant increase in the cultural obstacles to easy social intercourse between the sexes. Victorian men frequently assumed that female company would be unimproving and unstimulating. The young Mandell Creighton admitted: 'I find ladies in general are very unsatisfactory mental food: they seem to have no particular thoughts or ideas, and though for a time it is flattering to one's vanity to think one may teach them some, it palls after a while.'<sup>41</sup> That remained his view until, three years later, he met his future wife in the intellectually

<sup>37</sup> On these dichotomies, see Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988).

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Claudia Nelson, 'Sex and the Single Boy: Ideals of Manliness and Sexuality in Victorian Literature for Boys', *Victorian Studies*, 32 (1989), 530.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in A. Smiles, *Samuel Smiles and his Surroundings* (1956), 67.

<sup>40</sup> Claudia Nelson, *Boys Will Be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857–1917* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1991).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Louise Creighton, *Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton* (2 vols., 1904), I, 33.

bracing atmosphere of a lecture by Ruskin. It was hardly an auspicious frame of mind in which to cultivate the society of the opposite sex.

Secondly, Victorian manliness was closely identified with work. 'It is by work, work, work – constant, never-ceasing work – work well and faithfully done . . . that you are to rise out of things into men' declared William Landels in 1859.<sup>42</sup> Such passages can be read as a somewhat crude attempt to socialise young men in the habits of discipline. But the work ethic was much more deeply inscribed in middle-class masculinity than that. It not only served to keep men at a punishing pitch of self-discipline; it also justified the priority they attached to money-making and personal advancement by elevating work as a good in itself. No one conveyed this message with more rhetorical force than Thomas Carlyle (and no one made less effort to master the niceties of polite behaviour). His own compulsion to keep despair at bay by ceaseless activity produced a secular gospel of work, in which salvation lay in the spirit in which the work was undertaken rather than its outcome, and in which idleness represented a threat to the self. 'Consider how, even in the meanest sorts of Labour, the whole soul of man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work! . . . The man is now a man.'<sup>43</sup> The immense popular success of *Past and Present* (1843) testifies to the deep resonance these ideas had with men making their way in life.<sup>44</sup> From this perspective, the gentleman's material ease was corrupting rather than empowering. What had been seen in the eighteenth century as the prerequisite for public life was now thought to undermine moral vigour. It was not unknown for a middle-class man to reject a gentlemanly suitor for his daughter precisely *because* he enjoyed 'prospects', lest she should find herself yoked to a man without energy or self-reliance.<sup>45</sup> Manliness upheld the work ethic; gentlemanliness had a distinctly ambivalent relationship with it.

Thirdly, manliness represented the quintessence of individualism. This is something of a paradox. In one sense Victorian manliness was no different from other models of masculinity in requiring the young male to conform to the expectations of the peer group by adjusting his behaviour and self-image to the approved model of manhood. But in commercial and professional society individualism *was* the approved model. Some of that approval emanated from religious sources. Confronted by what they regarded as the scandalous state of youthful morality, Evangelical writers in the earlier part of the century had

<sup>42</sup> William Landels, *How Men Are Made* (1859), 43.

<sup>43</sup> Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 177.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1833–70* (New Haven, CT, 1957), 242–62.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, John Heaton to Helen Heaton, 17 May 1874, Heaton MSS, private collection, Cornhill-on-Tweed.

aimed to moralise manliness as a vital part of their programme of social regeneration. In their view the problem with manliness lay in its undue respect for the worldly standards subsumed in the notion of ‘reputation’; in its place they strove to establish ‘character’, by which they meant the internal urgings of a man’s conscience.<sup>46</sup> The voluminous religious advice literature addressed to young men at this time represents the achievement of manhood almost entirely as a solitary quest, with other men regarded as a temptation to idleness or worse.<sup>47</sup>

But the material underpinning for this individualism was also very strong. The Victorian bourgeois world was highly competitive, and it placed a premium on the virtues of self-reliance and personal autonomy. The strongest metaphors of manliness were drawn from the battlefield (life was ‘a battle and a march’, insisted Carlyle);<sup>48</sup> it therefore fitted the uphill struggle of outsiders far more closely than the life of those with an assured social position. Success was viewed as a personal achievement, and adversity could only be overcome by calling on personal reserves of character. As Stefan Collini has put it, ‘the classic scenes of character-testing are essentially private – facing the discouragement of an empty order-book, coping with the failure of one’s inventions and projects, studying deep into the night to acquire by hard labour what seemed to come so easily to the expensively-educated’.<sup>49</sup> Ordeals of that kind were more likely to produce a prickly autonomy than a complaisant ease of manner. Indeed the drive to self-reliance almost eclipsed the idea of sociability. Far from being honed in society, manliness was regarded as a personal possession, achieved and maintained through adversity: in Charles Kingsley’s phrase, ‘all true manhood consists in the defiance of circumstances’.<sup>50</sup> Growing up to manhood was less about cultivating easy relationships with one’s peers than about learning to stand on one’s own two feet – and stay standing amid the buffets of fortune. At the age of twenty the future publisher Daniel Macmillan told his brother: ‘I do not feel bound to follow in the footsteps of any of my relations. I am here to act for myself . . . The most important things must be done by myself – alone.’<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, Morals and Class in England 1774–1858* (1994), 63–71, 100–3, 107–8.

<sup>47</sup> For example: H. S. Brown, *Manliness* (1858); J. B. Figgis, *Manliness, Womanliness, Godliness* (1861); Thomas Hughes, *The Manliness of Christ* (1879).

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, 206.

<sup>49</sup> Stefan Collini, ‘The Idea of “Character” in Victorian Political Thought’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. 35 (1985), 40.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, 110.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Macmillan to Malcolm Macmillan, 15 June 1833, quoted in Thomas Hughes, *Memoir of Daniel Macmillan* (1882), 17.

Thus far I have presented manliness as essentially the code of middle-class men. A case can be made for the proposition that manliness was merely the gendered face of class consciousness. Davidoff and Hall, for example, analyse a form of manliness which proved highly functional in bourgeois terms, and since they give scant consideration to other class forms, it is reasonable to conclude from their work that gender, while undoubtedly the subject of a distinctive social language, was subordinate to other forms of status.<sup>52</sup> But there is an important sense in which manliness transcended class, owing its discursive power precisely to its detachment from the strongest social divisions of the day. In common culture manliness stood for those qualities which were respected by men without regard to class – by men *as men*. It provided a language for commending (or disparaging) one's fellows across the boundaries of class. In order to gauge the strength of the reaction against politeness, it is necessary to recognise that many of the manly values which prevailed among the bourgeoisie also had a purchase on the upper reaches of the working class. (The same could hardly be said of politeness; as one working-class writer put it in 1861, the word was rarely used and was taken to mean 'some supposed affectation of "fine" behaviour'.)<sup>53</sup>

Significant differences of emphasis were to be found between working-class and middle-class versions of manliness. The lives of most working men made much heavier calls on their physical strength than was the case in the middle class, and bodily vigour was thus even more at a premium. The manly way to settle a dispute or defend one's honour was with the fists – a convention which did not persist much beyond the schooldays of the middle-class boy. Working-class independence meant not freedom from patronage, but security against penury and the associated indignities of charity and the workhouse. Given the prevalence of women's wage-earning, polarised notions of sexual difference carried less weight among workers than among the bourgeoisie. Equally, middle-class values of individualism were less relevant to a working-class culture permeated by the fraternalism of friendly societies, working men's clubs and trade unions.

But the common ground of manliness was important. One vital element was a strong masculine investment in work. Partly this was because diligence and self-discipline seemed to hold out to working men the promise of upward social mobility (of the kind which Samuel Smiles provided so many invigorating anecdotes). Partly also intense commitment to work was for most workers a precondition of main-

<sup>52</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, *passim*.

<sup>53</sup> J. Shepherd, in *Social Science: Being Selections from John Cassell's Prize Essays by Working Men* (1861), 187.

taining a household: this was the period when the word ‘breadwinner’ entered the language, and when the ‘family wage’ became a key objective of organised labour.<sup>54</sup> But in the upper reaches of the working class there existed a version of the ‘work-for-its-own-sake’ ethos in the valorisation of skill. Masculine self-respect was bound up with apprenticeship and the successful practice of hard-won skill thereafter – as is demonstrated by the craft pride of a community such as the carpet-weavers of Kidderminster described by Sonya Rose.<sup>55</sup> Above all, respect for physical vigour, courage and independence were manly values which transcended class, and which informed the standards by which one man judged another, whatever class he belonged to.

This convergence of gender ideals had considerable political significance. Manly discourse was socially inclusive, uncluttered by class baggage. It elevated attributes which all men admired, which were potentially within the grasp of every man and which therefore served to diminish the moral gulf between classes. Thackeray saluted the person ‘who can look the world honestly in the face with an equal manly sympathy for the great and the small’.<sup>56</sup> There was a decided implication of social levelling. In the final analysis manliness was more than an indicator of social mores; it had potentially democratic implications, pointing to a politics of social inclusion.

It was John Vincent who first observed that manliness was ‘the great moral idea of liberalism’.<sup>57</sup> By this he meant that Liberalism stood for a rejection of all forms of patronage – in other words it elevated manly independence to be a vital prerequisite of responsible political agency. Liberalism’s image of the citizen was someone who stood on his own two feet, responsible for his opinions and answerable to no one. Such a person could safely be entrusted with the franchise because his freedom from obligation would ensure that he would not be susceptible to pressure. Indeed, his resistance against pressure was proof of his political virtue, which helps to explain why many liberals were reluctant to legislate for the secret ballot.<sup>58</sup> The rhetoric of independence was an important dimension of the debates on parliamentary reform prior to 1832,<sup>59</sup> and as the focus of debate about the franchise shifted to the working man, independence became an even more critical determinant

<sup>54</sup> Wally Secombe, ‘Patriarchy Stabilized: The Construction of the Male Bread-Winner Norm in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *Social History*, 11 (1986), 53–76.

<sup>55</sup> Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (1992), 128–30.

<sup>56</sup> W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ch. 62, quoted in Gilmour, *Idea of the Gentleman*, 69.

<sup>57</sup> John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party* (1966), 14.

<sup>58</sup> James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), 102, 158, 314.

<sup>59</sup> Work in progress by Matthew McCormack.

of political virtue, especially during the run-up to the 1867 Reform Act. The most effective working-class political organisations did not demand manhood suffrage, since that would have extended the vote to many categories of men who lacked either the moral or the material resources to cast their vote responsibly. The nub of the reformers' case was that the 'independent working man' met the essential criteria for admission to full citizenship; he came within the pale of the constitution no less than those sections of the middle class granted the vote in 1832. The discourse of reform was, as Keith McClelland has put it, characterised by 'the play of independence and dependence'.<sup>60</sup>

But the political purchase of manliness extended well beyond the benchmark of independence. It also served as a marker to distinguish the broad mass of citizens from the privileged and idle. What 'the people' had in common was what made them socially useful – the dignity of labour. In popular culture this was the foundation of true manliness, and it distinguished the people from the aristocracy. In answer to the question 'In what does manhood consist?', one working-class campaigner responded in 1873, 'Well, certainly not in walking the streets with a cigar and a silver-headed cane.' The men who possessed the rights of citizenship, he continued, were 'the men who swept the streets or shaped the wood, or hammered the iron, or hewed the coal' – a telling indication of the potential scope of manly discourse.<sup>61</sup> One explanation for the high profile of manliness, then, is that its values corresponded with the individualism and the suspicion of privilege which were widespread in popular political culture between the first and third Reform Acts. Manliness worked well as the common profession of a masculine representative democracy whose members, even before 1867, included a great swathe of voters who could never have claimed the name of 'gentleman' or sought admission to polite society.

The seal was set on the decline of politeness as a political reference point by the emergence of 'the plain man' as the ideal citizen. This was not an entirely original conceit, but it was advanced with an entirely new intensity and conviction by the most acclaimed leaders of the Liberal party. John Bright came from a wealthy factory-owning family, but in speech and dress he played up to the image of a man of the people, and the simplicity of his family life at home in Oldham was widely commended.<sup>62</sup> When he retired from politics in 1870 –

<sup>60</sup> Keith McClelland, '“England's Greatness, the Working Man”', in C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000), 97–101.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Beckwith, quoted in Eugenio Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–80* (Cambridge, 1992), 286.

<sup>62</sup> Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), 116–24.

ironically from a nervous disorder which his robustness of manner belied – Walter Bagehot remarked, ‘There is an evident sincerity and bluff *bona fides* about him, which goes straight to the hearts of Englishmen.’<sup>63</sup> An even more striking reinvention was achieved by W. E. Gladstone. His education at Eton and Christchurch had been designed to turn him into the consummate polite gentleman. It has been said of Gladstone that ‘he accepted the manners of the landed class, not merely without demur, but with enthusiasm’ on account of the Welsh estates he acquired through marriage.<sup>64</sup> By the 1860s, however, Gladstone was ‘the people’s William’, and later the ‘Grand Old Man’. His honest manliness was symbolised by his much publicised tree-felling at Hawarden – the perfect symbol of full masculine vigour.<sup>65</sup> His career can stand for the triumph of manliness over politeness in English political culture. Manliness provided a major discursive resource against the exclusive pretensions of gentlemanly status by suggesting that all that was needed to make a good citizen was to be a good man. In that sense it was well suited to a political discourse which spoke with increasing authority in terms of ‘the people’.<sup>66</sup>

What then was the relationship between gentlemanly politeness and manly simplicity during the high Victorian era? The discussion between Margaret Hale and John Thornton turned on the issue of which could be subsumed in the other. Margaret accepted the ascription of all worthy qualities to the gentleman, including what passed for manly ones. John dismissed gentlemanliness as no more than a code for ordering social relations, which did not touch the inner man. Given the inclusive character of manliness, it would be surprising if there were not substantial convergence. Michael Curtin has observed, for example, that the manly independence and rejection of patronage which were valued so highly by the middle and working classes ‘were easily compatible with the characteristics of the ideal gentleman’.<sup>67</sup> Respect for martial fitness and athletic prowess were also shared. The moral qualities of courage and Stoicism were common to both. Independence mattered to the gentleman no less than the businessman or professional man, though it was measured in rents rather than profits or fees. Even the inner integrity in which Thornton took such pride was also

<sup>63</sup> Walter Bagehot, ‘Mr Bright’s Retirement’ (1870), repr. in *Historical Essays*, ed. N. St J. Stevas (1971), 226.

<sup>64</sup> Vincent, *Formation of the Liberal Party*, 212–13.

<sup>65</sup> On Gladstone’s tree-felling, see Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, 396–400.

<sup>66</sup> It would be interesting to evaluate Conservative politicians from the same perspective. Matthew McCormack has pointed out to me that Disraeli, of course, was a vivid throw-back to the dandy tradition.

<sup>67</sup> Curtin, *Propriety and Position*, 290.

appropriated by definitions of gentlemanliness. Writing in the *Contemporary Review* in 1869, J. R. Vernon commented: 'A gentleman is a MAN. And he realizes what is contained in that word – the high descent, the magnificent destiny. So in the presence of his God and of his fellow-men he is never abject; he is always manly, always keeps self-respect.'<sup>68</sup> But this was special pleading. The difference between gentlemanliness and manliness was critical, and it turned on the dichotomy between politeness and authenticity. This was the nub of John Thornton's hostility towards the fine gentleman. His views were matched from the other side of the social divide by Thomas Hughes through the character of Tom Brown's father. When Squire Brown declares his belief that 'a man is to be valued wholly and solely for that which he is in himself, for that which stands up in the four fleshly walls of him', he is identifying with 'manly' values and distancing himself from the birth and fine breeding habitually associated with men of his class.<sup>69</sup> The practical force of this distinction was accurately conveyed by the Revd Harvey Newcomb: a growing boy, he counselled, should strive to be 'both a man and a gentleman'. By aiming for the latter he would gain courtesy and propriety; by the former he would acquire courage, energy and perseverance. The desired outcome was 'a solid, energetic, manly character, combined with true gentility of manners'.<sup>70</sup> Manliness represented the common aspiration of men in all walks of life; gentlemanliness was a refinement which marked the boy out as one of a social elite.

Gentlemen had traditionally prided themselves on their refined manners, which served the double purpose of easing interpersonal relations and putting down a marker of social exclusiveness. That rationale still counted for something in the mid-Victorian era, but in a world where the basis of economic and political power was being steadily expanded, gentlemen were compelled to place much greater emphasis than in the past on their moral claims to preeminence, appealing to values which were shared throughout 'respectable' society and beyond. The notions of polite society and of polite conduct were increasingly devalued. James Fitzjames Stephen fairly summed up the meaning of politeness in a phrase which reflects its marginal status in Victorian culture: gentlemen, he said, were 'only picked and polished specimens of the material of which the nation at large is composed'.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> J. R. Vernon, 'The Grand Old Name of Gentleman', *Contemporary Review*, II (1869), 564.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857; repr. Oxford, 1989), 52.

<sup>70</sup> Harvey Newcomb, *Youth and its Duties: A Book for Young Gentlemen, Containing Useful Hints on the Formation of Character* (1873), 11.

<sup>71</sup> Stephen, 'Gentlemen', 340.