

Nancy Mitford

The English Aristocracy

THE English aristocracy may seem to be on the verge of decadence, but it is the only real aristocracy left in the world today. It has real political power through the House of Lords and a real social position through the Queen. An aristocracy in a republic is like a chicken whose head has been cut off: it may run about in a lively way, but in fact it is dead. There is nothing to stop a Frenchman, German, or Italian from calling himself the Duke of Carabosse if he wants to, and in fact the Continent abounds with invented titles. But in England the Queen is the fountain of honours and when she bestows a peerage upon a subject she bestows something real and unique.

The great distinction between the English aristocracy and any other has always been that, whereas abroad every member of a noble family is noble, in England none are noble except the head of the family. In spite of the fact that they enjoy courtesy titles, the sons and daughters of lords are commoners—though not so common as baronets and their wives who take precedence after honourables. (So, of course, do all knights, except Knights of the Garter who come after the eldest sons and the daughters of barons, but before the younger sons.) The descendants of younger sons, who, on the Continent would all be counts or barons, in England have no titles and sit even below knights. Furthermore, the younger sons and daughters of the very

richest lords receive, by English custom, but little money from their families, barely enough to live on. The sons are given the same education as their eldest brother and then turned out, as soon as they are grown up, to fend for themselves; the daughters are given no education at all, the general idea being that they must find some man to keep them—which, in fact, they usually do. The rule of primogeniture has kept together the huge fortunes of English lords; it has also formed our class system.

But there is in England no aristocratic class that forms a caste. We have about 950 peers, not all of whom, incidentally, sit in the House of Lords. Irish peers have no seats, though some Irish peers have a subsidiary U.K. peerage giving a seat; Scottish peers elect sixteen representatives from among themselves. Peeresses in their own right are not, as yet, admitted. Most of the peers share the education, usage, and point of view of a vast upper middle class, but the upper middle class does not, in its turn, merge imperceptibly into the middle class. There is a very definite border line, easily recognisable by hundreds of small but significant landmarks.

WHEN I speak of these matters I am always accused of being a snob, so, to illustrate my point, I propose to quote from Professor Alan Ross of Birmingham University. Professor Ross has written a paper,

printed in Helsinki in 1954, for the *Bulletin de la Société Neo-philologique de Helsinki*, on "Upper Class English Usage." Nobody is likely to accuse either this learned man or his Finnish readers of undue snobbishness. The Professor, pointing out that it is solely by their language that the upper classes nowadays are distinguished (since they are neither cleaner, richer, nor better-educated than anybody else) has invented a useful formula: U (for upper class) -speaker versus non-U-speaker. Such exaggeratedly non-U usage as "serviette" for "napkin" he calls non-U indicators. Since "a piece of mathematics or a novel written by a member of the upper class is not likely to differ in any way from one written by a member of another class . . . in writing it is in fact only modes of address, postal addresses and habits of beginning and ending letters that serve to demarcate the class." . . . The names of many houses are themselves non-U; the ideal U-address is PQR where P is a place name, Q a describer, and R the name of a county, as "Shirwell Hall, Salop." (Here I find myself in disagreement with Professor Ross—in my view abbreviations such as Salop, Herts, or Glos, are decidedly non-U. Any sign of undue haste, in fact, is apt to be non-U, and I go so far as preferring, except for business letters, not to use air mail.) "But," adds Professor Ross, "today few gentlemen can maintain this standard and they often live in houses with non-U names such as Fairmeads or El Nido." Alas!

He speaks of the U-habit of silence, and perhaps does not make as much of it as he might. Silence is the only possible U-response to many embarrassing modern situations: the ejaculation of "cheers" before drinking, for example, or "it was so nice seeing you," after saying goodbye. In silence, too, one must endure the use of the Christian name by comparative strangers and the horror of being introduced by Christian and surname without any prefix. This unspeakable usage sometimes occurs in letters—Dear XX—which, in silence, are quickly torn up, by me.

After discoursing at some length on pronunciation, the professor goes on to vocabu-

lary and gives various examples of U and non-U usage.

Cycle is non-U against U *bike*.

Dinner: U-speakers eat *luncheon* in the middle of the day and *dinner* in the evening. Non-U-speakers (also U-children and U-dogs) have their *dinner* in the middle of the day.

Greens is non-U for U *vegetables*.

Home: non-U—"they have a lovely *home*"; U—"they've a very nice *house*."

Ill: "I was *ill* on the boat" is non-U against U *sick*.

Mental: non-U for U *mad*.

Note paper: non-U for U *writing paper*.

Toilet paper: non-U for U *lavatory paper*.

Wealthy: non-U for U *rich*.

To these I would add:

Sweet: non-U for U *pudding*.

Dentures: non-U for U *false teeth*. This, and *glasses* for *spectacles*, almost amount to non-U indicators.

Wire: non-U for U *telegram*.

Phone: a non-U indicator.

(One must add that the issue is sometimes confused by U-speakers using non-U indicators as a joke. Thus Uncle Matthew in *The Pursuit of Love* speaks of his *dentures*.)

Finally Professor Ross poses the question: Can a non-U-speaker become a U-speaker? His conclusion is that an adult can never achieve complete success "because one word or phrase will suffice to brand an apparent U-speaker as originally non-U (for U-speakers themselves never make mistakes)." I am not quite sure about this. Usage changes very quickly and I even know undisputed U-speakers who pronounce girl "gurl," which twenty years ago would have been unthinkable. All the same, it is true that one U-speaker recognises another U-speaker almost as soon as he opens his mouth, though U-speaker A may deplore certain lapses in the conversation of U-speaker B.

From these U-speakers spring the sensible men of ample means who generally seem to rule our land. When the means of these sensible men become sufficiently ample they can very easily be ennobled, should they wish it, and join the House of Lords. It might therefore be supposed that there is no

aristocracy at all in England, merely an upper middle class, some of whom are lords; but, oddly enough, this is not so. A lord does not have to be born to his position and, indeed, can acquire it through political activities, or the sale of such unaristocratic merchandise as beer, but though he may not be a U-speaker he becomes an aristocrat as soon as he receives his title. The Queen turns him from socialist leader, or middle-class businessman, into a nobleman, and his outlook from now on will be the outlook of an aristocrat.

ANCESTRY has never counted much in England. The English lord knows himself to be such a very genuine article that, when looking for a wife, he can rise above such baubles as seize quartiers. Kind hearts, in his view, are more than coronets, and large tracts of town property more than Norman blood. He marries for love, and is rather inclined to love where money is; he rarely marries in order to improve his coat of arms. (Heiresses have caused the extinction as well as the enrichment of many an English family, since the heiress, who must be an only child if she is to be really rich, often comes of barren or enfeebled stock.) This unconcern for pedigree leads people to suppose that the English lords are a jumped-up lot, and that their families are very seldom "genuine" and "old." One often hears it said, "No Englishman alive today would be eligible to drive in the carriage of a King of France." "Nobody really has Norman blood." "The true aristocracy of England was wiped out in the Wars of the Roses." And so on.

There is some truth in all these statements, but it is not the whole truth. Many of our oldest families have never been ennobled. Some no longer hold peerages. The ancient Scrope family has, in its time, held the baronies of Scrope of Marsham and Scrope of Bolton, the earldoms of Wiltshire and of Sunderland, the sovereignty of the Isle of Man, but the head of the family is now Mr. Scrope. If he should be offered a peerage he would no doubt proudly refuse. The only existing families known to descend from knights who came over with William the Conqueror

in time to fight at Hastings, the Malets, the Giffards, and the Gresleys, are another case in point. Of the Norman knights who came during William's reign or later, some were never anything but country gentlemen, but some are the direct ancestors of modern peers: St. John, Talbot, West, Curzon, Clinton, Grey, Seymour, St. Aubyn, Sinclair, Haig, and Hay, for instance. There are 100 peers of England from before the Union (including Prince Charles, as Duke of Cornwall). All of them are descended in the female line from King Edward III, except possibly Lord Byron, though a little research would probably find him an Edward III descent. All peers, except barons, are officially styled "Cousin" by the Queen; as regards most dukes and earls this is not so much fiction as a distant truth. Only 26 earls have been created in this century and they have all been great men like Lloyd George and Haig. (The Haigs have borne arms and lived at Bemersyde since the 12th century but had never previously been ennobled.)

The dukes are rather new creations. When James I came to the throne there were no dukes at all, the high traitors Norfolk and Somerset having had their dukedoms attainted. They were both restored in 1660. Between 1660 and 1760, 18 dukedoms were created. On the whole, Englishmen are made dukes as a reward for being rich or royal (4 descend from bastards of Charles II), though dukedoms have sometimes been bestowed for merit. The oldest title is that of Earl. Several medieval earldoms still exist. Sixty-five barons hold titles from before 1711. Three hundred and twenty-seven of the present-day peerages were created before 1800, 382 belong to families which have borne arms in the direct male line since before 1485 and which are therefore eligible, as far as birth is concerned, to be Knights of Malta.

BUT whether their families are "old" or "new" is of small account—the lords all have one thing in common: they share an aristocratic attitude to life. What is this attitude? The purpose of the aristocrat is to

lead, therefore his functions are military and political. There can be no doubt of the military excellence of our noblemen. Two hundred and fourteen peers alive today have been decorated in battle or mentioned in despatches. The families of the premier duke and the premier earl of England hold the George Cross. In politics, including the unglamorous and often boring local politics, they have worked hard for no reward and done their best according to their lights.

The purpose of the aristocrat is most emphatically not to work for money. His ancestors may have worked in order to amass the fortune which he enjoys, though on the whole the vast riches of the English lords come from sources unconnected with honest toil; but he will seldom do the same. His mind is not occupied with money, it turns upon other matters. When money is there he spends it on maintaining himself in his station. When it is no longer there he ceases to spend, he draws in his horns. Even the younger sons of lords seem, in all ages, to have been infected with this point of view: there is nothing so rare as for the scion of a noble house to make a fortune by his own efforts. In the old days they went into professions—the Army, the Navy, diplomacy, and the Church—in which it is impossible to earn more than a living. Those who went to the colonies were administrators, they rarely feathered their nests—the great nabobs were essentially middle class. Nowadays younger sons go into the City, but I have yet to hear of one making a large fortune; more often they lose in unwise speculations what little capital they happen to own.

All this should not be taken as a sign that our lords are lazy or unenterprising. The point is that, in their view, effort is unrelated to money. Now this view has, to a large extent, communicated itself to the English race and nation with the result that our outlook is totally different from that of our American cousins, who have never had an aristocracy. Americans relate all effort, all work, and all of life itself to the dollar. Their talk is of nothing but dollars. The English

seldom sit happily chatting for hours on end about pounds. In England, public business is its own reward, nobody would go into Parliament in order to become rich, neither do riches bring public appointments. Our ambassadors to foreign states are experienced diplomatists, not socially ambitious millionairesses.

THIS idiosyncratic view of money has its good side and its bad. Let us glance at the case history of Lord Fortinbras. Fortinbras is ruined—we are now in the 1930's. (All English noblemen, according to themselves, are ruined, a fantasy I shall deal with later, but Fortinbras really is.) He is not ruined because of death duties, since his father died when he was a child, before they became so heavy, but because he and his forbears have always regarded their estates with the eyes of sportsmen rather than of cultivators. It is useless for him to plead that the policy of cheap corn has been his downfall; an intelligent landowner has always been able to make money with prize cattle, racehorses, market gardens, timber, and so on. But Fortinbras's woods have been looked after by gamekeepers and not by woodmen, his farms have been let to tenants chosen for their tenderness towards foxes and partridges rather than for their agricultural efficiency. His land is undercapitalised, his cottagers live in conditions no better than those of their Saxon forebears, water and electric light are laid on in his stables but not in the dwellings of his tenantry. He has made various unwise speculations and lost a "packet" on the Turf. In short, he deserves to be ruined and he is ruined.

Now what does he do? He is young, healthy, and not stupid; his wife, the daughter of another peer, is handsome, bossy, and energetic. She is the kind of woman who, in America, would be running something with enormous efficiency and earning thousands. They have two babies, Dominick and Caroline, and a Nanny. Does it occur to either Lord or Lady Fortinbras to get a job and retrieve the family fortunes? It does not. First of all they sell everything that is not

entailed, thus staving off actual want. They shut up most of the rooms in their house, send away the servants (except, of course, Nanny) and get the Dowager Lady Fortinbras and her sister to come and cook, clean, dust, and take trays upstairs to the nursery. Old Lady Fortinbras is quite useful, and Lady Enid is a treasure. The Fortinbras realise that they are very lucky, and if at heart they wish there were a mother's hall for the two ladies to sit in of an evening, they never say so, even to each other. Fortinbras chops the wood, stokes the boiler, brings in the coal, washes the Morris Cowley, and drives off in it to attend the County Council and sit on the Bench. Lady Fortinbras helps in the house, digs in the border, exercises the Border terriers, and also does a great deal of committee work. They are both on the go from morning to night, but it is a go that does not bring in one penny. Their friends and neighbours all say, "Aren't the Fortinbras wonderful?"

Comes the war. They clear the decks by sending Nanny and the children to an American couple, the Karamazovs, whom they once met at St. Moritz and who have sent them Christmas cards ever since. Fortinbras goes off with his territorials and Lady Fortinbras joins the A.T.S. Their war records are brilliant in the extreme, their energy, courage, and instinct for leadership have at last found an outlet, and in no time at all they both become generals. After the war they are not surprised to find themselves more ruined than ever. The Karamazovs, whose lives for several years have been made purgatory by Dominick, Caroline, and Nanny, especially Nanny, send in a modest bill for the schooling of the young people which Fortinbras has no intention of settling. It would seem unreasonable to pay for one's children to be taught to murder the English language and taught, apparently, nothing else whatever. Dominick, failing to get into Eton, has had to be sent to some dreadful school in Scotland. Besides, what did the Karamazovs do in the war? Nothing, according to Nanny, but flop in and out of a swimming pool. The Karamazovs come

to England expecting to be thanked, fêted, and paid, only to find that their friends have left for the Northern Capitals.

Now the Fortinbras are getting on, over fifty. Dominick having come of age, they have broken the entail and sold everything, very badly, as the house is full of dry rot and the farms are let to tenants who cannot be dislodged. However, a little money does result from the sale. They arrange a mews flat behind Harrods where, generals once again, they will continue to cook and wash up for the rest of their days. They both still sit on endless committees, Fortinbras goes to the House of Lords, they kill themselves with overwork, and have never, except for their Army pay, earned one single penny. "Aren't the Fortinbras wonderful?" Well yes, in a way they are.

Now, while the Fortinbras have the typical aristocratic outlook on money, the state of their finances is by no means typical. Most people, nowadays, take it for granted that the aristocracy is utterly impoverished, a view carefully fostered by the lords themselves. It takes a shooting affray, letting police and reporters into a country house, to remind the ordinary citizen that establishments exist where several men-servants wait on one young woman at dinner. There are still many enormous fortunes in the English aristocracy, into which income tax and death duties have made no appreciable inroads. Arundel, Petworth, Hatfield, Woburn, Hardwicke, Blenheim, Haddon, Drumlanrig, Alnwick, Stratfield Saye, Harewood, Knole, Knowsley, Wilton, Holkham, Glamis, Cullen, Cliveden, Highclere, Althorp, Mentmore—all vast houses—are still inhabited by lords who have inherited them, and this little list is a mere fraction of the whole. The treasures such houses contain are stupendous. When the Duke of Buccleuch came to visit the Louvre, the curator, who had been to England and seen the Duke's collection of French furniture, greeted him with the words: "I apologise for the furniture of the Louvre, M. le Duc."

Another English duke owns a collection of

incunables second only to that formerly in the possession of the Kings of Spain, and more Groslier bindings than the Bibliothèque Nationale. A jeweller told me that out of the one hundred finest diamonds in the world, sixty are in English families. One could go on citing such instances indefinitely.

The English, so censorious of those foreigners (the French peasantry for instance) who do not pay their taxes as they should, have themselves brought tax evasion within legal limits to a fine art. Death duties can be avoided altogether if the owner of an estate gives it to his heir and then lives another five years. One agreeable result of this rule is that old lords are cherished as never before. Their heirs, so far from longing to step into their shoes, will do anything to keep them alive. Doctors and blood donors hover near them, they are not allowed to make the smallest effort, or to be worried or upset, and are encouraged to live in soft climates and salubrious spots.

The crippling effects of supertax also can be overcome in various ways by those who own large capital sums. The aristocrat can augment his fortune in many a curious manner, since he is impervious to a sense of shame (all aristocrats are: shame is a bourgeois notion). The lowest peasant of the Danube would stick at letting strangers into his home for 2s. 6d., but our dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons not only do this almost incredible thing, they glory in it, they throw themselves into the sad commerce with rapture, and compete as to who among them can draw the greatest crowds. It is the first topic of conversation in noble circles today, the tourists being referred to in terms of sport rather than of cash—a sweepstake on the day's run, or the bag counted after the shoot.

"I get twice as many as Reggie, but Bert does better than me."

The baiting of the trap is lovingly considered.

"Mummy dresses up in her Coronation robes, they can't resist it."

"I say, old boy, look out—you don't want to pay entertainment tax."

"No, no—I've taken counsel's opinion."

"We've started a pets' cemetery—a quid for a grave, three quid for a stone, and a fiver if Daphne writes a poem for it."

Of course the fellow countrymen of people who will descend to such methods of raising cash imagine that they must be driven to it by direst need. The fact is they thoroughly enjoy it. Also it has become a matter of policy to appear very poor. The lords are retrenching visibly, and are especially careful to avoid any form of ostentation: for instance, only five of them saw fit to attend the last coronation in their family coaches. Coronets on luggage, motor cars, and so on are much less used than formerly. Aristocrats no longer keep up any state in London, where family houses hardly exist now. Here many of them have shown a sad lack of civic responsibility, as we can see by looking at poor London today. At the beginning of this century practically all the residential part of the West End belonged to noblemen and the Crown. A more charming, elegant capital city would have been far to seek. To the Crown—more specifically, I believe to King George V in person—and to two Dukes, Westminster and Bedford, we owe the fact that London is not yet exactly like Moscow, a conglomeration of dwellings. Other owners cheerfully sold their houses and "developed" their property without a thought for the visible result. Park Lane, most of Mayfair, the Adelphi, and so on bear witness to a barbarity which I, for one, cannot forgive.

THE lords have never cared very much for London, and are, in this respect, the exact opposite of their French counterparts who loathe the country. But even where his country house is concerned, the English nobleman, whose forebears were such lovers of beauty, seems to have lost all æsthetic sense, and it is sad to see the havoc he often brings to his abode, both inside and out. His ancestors spent months abroad, buying pictures and statues, which he cheerfully sells in order to spend months abroad. Should one of his guests perceive that a blackened square of canvas in a spare bedroom is a genuine Caravaggio, that picture will appear at Chris-

ties before you can say Jack Robinson, though there is no necessity whatever for such a sale. The Caravaggio buyer planted his estate with avenues and coppices and clumps of cedar trees. The Caravaggio seller fiddles about with herbaceous borders, one of the most hideous conceptions known to man. He never seems to plant anything larger than a flowering prunus, never builds ornamental bridges, or digs lakes, or adds wings to his house. The last nobleman to build a folly on his estate must have been Lord Berners and he was regarded as foolish indeed to do such a thing. The noble eccentric, alas, seems to be dying out. Lord Berners was one, another was the late Duke of Bedford, pacifist, zoologist, and a good man. One of the chapters of his autobiography, I seem to remember, was headed "Spiders I have Known," and he tells of one spider he knew whose favourite food was roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. The great days of patronage, too, are over, though there are country houses which still shelter some mild literary figure as librarian. The modern nobleman cannot, however, be blamed for no longer patronising art, music, and letters. Artists, musicians, and writers are today among the very richest members of the community and even an English aristocrat could hardly afford to maintain Mr. Somerset Maugham, M. Stravinsky, or M. Picasso as part of his establishment.

Voltaire very truly said that those who own are those who wish to own: this wish seems to have left the English lords. Divest, divest, is the order of the day. The nobleman used to study a map of his estate to see how it could be enlarged, filling out a corner here, extending a horizon there. Nowadays he has no such ambitions; he would much rather sell than buy. The family is not considered as it used to be; the ancestors are no longer revered, indeed they are wilfully forgotten, partly perhaps from a feeling of guilt when all that they so carefully amassed is being so carelessly scattered. The dead are hardly mourned. "Far the best for him," the children say, cheerfully (so long, of course, as he has lived the requisite five years). Nobody wears black any more. The younger

generation is no longer planned for, and there is a general feeling of "*après nous le déluge.*"

THE instinct of the lords to divest themselves of age-long influence and rights extends to their influence and rights in the Church. Most of them are members of the Church of England; though there are forty-seven Roman Catholics with seats in the House of Lords. On the whole, the lords, in common with most of their fellow countrymen, have always regarded religious observance as a sort of patriotic duty. The Church is the Church of England and must be supported to show that we are not as foreigners are. A friend of mine voiced this attitude during the war: "Well, you know, I don't do fire-watching or Home Guard and I feel one must do something to help the war, so I always go to Church on Sunday." I am sure he did not imagine that his prayers would drive back the German hordes; he went as a gesture of social solidarity. Hitherto, the livings of our Church have been the gift of landowners, who have generally chosen downright, muscular Christians of low Church leanings. "Don't want lace and smells in my Church." Zeal has always been frowned upon. As it is impossible to remove a parson once he is installed in his living, some of the most ringing rows of all time have been between the Manor and the Vicarage. Now, however, faithful to the spirit of divest, divest, the temporal lords are busily putting their livings at the disposal of their spiritual colleagues, the Bishops. Many people think that this will lead to more lace, more smells, and more un-English zeal in the Church, and indeed greatly alter its character. Incidentally, the marriage customs of the peerage have lately become very lax. One peer in eight has divested himself of his wife, and foreigners notice that there are rather more duchesses than dukes in London society today.

As for the House of Lords which gives the English aristocrat his unique position, Lord Hailsham, himself an unwilling member, says that the majority of peers are voting for

its abolition "with their feet," by simply neglecting their hereditary duties. It must be said that the number of regular attendants has never been very large, and the august chamber has always been characterised by an atmosphere of the dormitory if not of the morgue. This is distressing to an active young fellow like Lord Hailsham but it is nothing new. One of the merits of the Upper House has been to consist of a hard core of politicians reinforced now and then by experts, and only flooded out in times of crisis by all its members. These have hitherto proved not unrepresentative of public opinion. Now, however, it seems that it is hardly possible to get through the work, so small is the attendance.

Does this apparent abdication of the lords in so many different directions mean that the English aristocracy is in full decadence and will soon exist only like the appendix in the human body, a useless and sometimes harmful relic of the past? It would not be safe to assume so. The English lord has been nur-

tured on the land and is conversant with the cunning ways of the animal kingdom. He has often seen the grouse settle into the heather to rise and be shot at no more. He has noticed that enormous riches are not well looked on in the modern world and that in most countries his genus is extinct. It may be that he who, for a thousand years has weathered so many a storm, religious, dynastic, and political, is taking cover in order to weather yet one more. It may be that he will succeed. He must, of course, be careful not to overdo the protective colouring. An aristocracy cannot exist as a secret society. Nor must he overdo an appearance of destitution. There is the sad precedent of George Neville who was deprived of his dukedom (Bedford) by act of Parliament because "as is openly known he hath not, nor by inheritance may have, any livelihood to support the name, estate and dignity. . . ."

But the English lord is a wily old bird who seldom overdoes anything. It is his enormous strength.

Ghosts

Those houses haunt in which we leave
Something undone. It is not those
Great words or silence of love

That spread their echoes through a place
And fill the locked-up, unbreathed gloom.
Ghosts do not haunt with any face

That we have known; they only come
With arrogance to thrust at us
Our own omissions in a room.

The words we would not speak they use,
The deeds we dared not act they flaunt,
Our nervous silences they bruise;

It is our helplessness they choose
And our refusals that they haunt.

Elizabeth Jennings