

Kelley Eyre

Kelley Eyre, a recent graduate of Eastern Illinois University with teacher certification in social science, wrote this paper for Dr. Newton Key's British History class in the spring of 2001. She was inducted into Epsilon Mu of Phi Alpha Theta in 2001.

George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, focuses on many divisions among English society during the 1930s. The worldwide depression affected huge numbers of unemployed in both industrialized and rural districts throughout England. Orwell's book reveals the truth behind the doleful lives of the unemployed individuals desperately trying to survive, "Their job seemed to me so hopeless, so appalling that I wondered how anyone could put up with such a thing when prison was a possible alternative."^[1] Industrialization produced "labyrinthine slums," a "dirty little country," and a rapidly spreading epidemic of suffering and struggles amidst thousands (17, 109). And yet, Orwell does not believe the real problem is the Depression, unemployment or even industrialization. Instead, the real problem is the class-based society in which he lived.

Orwell points to the problem of differences between the classes in relation to employment, housing, and education. Working and living conditions, disease, even food revealed a split in society between the lives of the lower and upper classes. As a member of the "lower-upper-middle class," Orwell compares himself to members of the lower classes (137). Moreover, it was in school that his class-based distinctions became entrenched. Orwell affirms that when he "was fourteen or fifteen, I was an odious little snob" (137). He refers to the effect of specific class distinctions he experienced as a young English schoolboy, "At school I was in a difficult position, for I was among boys who, for the most part, were much richer than myself, and I only went to an expensive public school because I happened to win a scholarship" (137). Orwell reflects upon his school days and notes that he "despised anyone who was not described as a 'gentleman'" (137). According to Walter Arnstein, "Because boys were enrolled as young as eight or nine, public schools encouraged both self-discipline and independence from immediate family ties. Their most important product was 'the character of the English gentleman's."^[2] Industrialization not only brought about a series of changes to the social structure of England, but further penetrated the class divisions in education during the 1930s. George Orwell maintains that the class distinctions of England during the 1930s posed a major problem.

Was Orwell correct? Was the class-based educational system the problem? This essay compares his understanding of Britain's schools with that provided by the *Times* in the 1930's. After reviewing several articles from *The Times*, it becomes evident that the editors and reporters focused principally on the upper classes, and ceased to engage themselves with issues of education concerning the lower classes. Class was, indeed, paramount in the British educational system.

Distinctions existed in the way education was provided to different divisions of society in England. The private schools (fee-paying), paradoxically called "public," offered a quality education to their students. And, as with other class distinctions in English society, a large inequality existed between the students who attended these schools and those who attended state-funded schools. Throughout his investigations and experience, Orwell testifies that "rent and clothes and school-bills are an unending nightmare" (124). One concerned parent even wrote to the editor of the *Times*,

Sir--In these peculiar times, when harassed parents find it increasingly difficult to keep boys at public schools, it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that public school executives might by the exercise of economies in certain directions lend some aid."^[3] Moreover, the author of the letter states that the Public School Boards convey an atmosphere of "callous disregard for parental interest. We hear so much of the need for economy, but the public school executives do not appear to have heard of it, or, if they have, it has left them stone cold." Almost one month later, the joint committee of the four secondary associations expressed its regret at the action taken by the Government (titled Circulation 1424) with regard to free places and fees in secondary schools:

The revolutionary extent of the changes foreshadowed is made clear from the following figures:--according to the latest official statistics, there are at present approximately 200,000 free places in the 1,367 schools on the Board's grant list, this figure representing 44.3 percent of the total number of pupils. The present free places will no longer be

free unless the circumstances of the parent satisfy the 'Means Test,' the low level of which will inevitably cut into a large proportion of pupils from the struggling middle class home so adversely affected already by the economic crisis".^[4]

Consequently, governmental action such as Circulation 1424 continued to strain middle and lower class families due to the harsh requirements demanded by the Means Test.

Orwell comments that the working class had a quite different view of education from the other classes, "And again, take the working-class attitude towards 'education.' How different it is from ours....Working people often have a vague reverence for learning in others, but where 'education' touches their own lives, they see through it and reject it by a healthy instinct" (116). He progresses onward by remembering the days when he observed fourteen year old boys working at "dismal jobs" (137). Orwell regards the "doom of a job" a dreadful burden upon anyone by the age of fourteen (116). But the teenage working-class boys seem to desire to leave school. They want "to be doing real work, not wasting his [their] time on ridiculous rubbish like history and geography" (116). According to a newspaper article titled "Public Schools and the Poor," a large demand for scholarships by the lower classes led to for the proposed creation of scholarships for elementary schoolboys at public schools.^[5] Most likely, students from the lower class aspired to continue their education in hopes of improving their knowledge in any direction and to take an intelligent interest in the world around them. The *Times* takes a stand on the issue of 14 scholarships by reporting,

If this discretion is widely and generously used, there should be a risk that those most likely to profit will be thrown prematurely into industry because all the places in secondary schools are occupied by those who can pay full fees.^[6]

For the first time, the *Times* suggests that students from the lower classes should be able to enter private schools.

Regarding the previous observation from the November 26th edition of the newspaper, many intelligent individuals would lose the opportunity to enter a private school due to the high tuition fees. Therefore, such students would get thrown into a factory job, without the prospect of continuing their education.

Orwell proves thought that money accompanies happiness more so than an education: "I should say that a manual worker, if he is in steady work and drawing good wages--and 'if' which gets bigger and bigger--has a better chance of being happy than and 'educated' man" (117). Again, Orwell is relaying his upper class attitude that the typical worker does not strive for an education. However, in 1932, the number of applicants for the Miners' Welfare Scholarship Scheme was 723, an increase of 51 candidates from the previous year.^[7] The total amount of money paid toward the scholarship fund reached £1,376,338 in 1932, which was awarded to miners as well as their children. Furthermore, the *Times* supports the Miners' Welfare Fund, "Close the door to the opportunities of the poor and you are bottling up forces which will blow you to destruction."^[8] Proof of the success of educating boys part-time at their employment is as follows:

Having started to earn their own living, the young employees are much more interested in opportunities for further education... Parents say that the young people are better behaved and 'easier to handle' at home... Managers say that the young people are better morally, better disciplined, more interested and more conscientious in their work, are better physically, and are more skilled at their job.^[9]

Students enrolled at school had proven to be more well-rounded individuals. The student's success in the classroom rubs off into his or her everyday encounters enhancing life skills such as communication, organization, and cooperation. Furthermore, classes at colleges for the unemployed became popular in the 1930s. The Working Men's College in Camden Town enrolled nearly 500 unemployed men in classes of education and physical training. The college taught language, arithmetic, handwriting and spelling to men mostly "half being under twenty-five years of age."^[10]

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell supposes, "there is no place in the world where snobbery is quite so ever-present or where it is cultivated in such refined in subtle forms as in an English public school...Your snobbishness... sticks by you till your grave" (137). Mr. Frank Fletcher confirms Orwell's opinion of the arrogant public school officials. At the annual meeting of the Incorporation of Headmasters in London, Fletcher joked, "The public schools, are open to everyone--like the Ritz Hotel".^[11] Obviously, the lavish hotel was only accessible to those families who could afford such costly rates. The upper classes defend that their public education is superior because of the spirit and intimacy among the students. Lord Middleton even quoted

Whenever public schoolboys met in any part of the world there was a feeling of comradeship in the feeling that

they had been to a British public school. Thanks to the public school training we were able when the Boer War broke out to enroll 4,000 men in the army, and they turned out to be excellent officers in a very few weeks.”^[12]

Furthermore, Lord Middleton gave insight, “One cannot help thinking that whatever the difficulties of this country there is a public school system and the public school spirit which will come to help us through them.”^[13] He argues that the educated were the strength of the industrial country. Orwell further states, “As one example out of many, take the public school code of honour, with its ‘team spirit’ and ‘Don’t hit a man when he’s down,’ and all the rest of that familiar bunkum” (165). The *Times* defends the value of the public schools and the strength of school spirit.

The boys were taught to work, and to wish to go out into the world and face their just responsibilities. Moreover, there was instilled in all of them a spirit which continued all through life-- a desire to render useful service to their country and fellow beings, outside and beyond school or office hours.^[14]

Is this “spirit” and loyalty to the nation only found in high-priced public schools? Of course, old male Dovorians or Etonians were proud of their school and wanted their sons to have the same opportunities and privileges they themselves had enjoyed. Nevertheless, does this mean lower class families did not want the best for their children? The *Times* made clear the respectability and inequalities among the classes. While the *Times* features stories regarding “The Old-School-Tie Spirit” [“The old school tie is a jolly good thing”]^[15] and “Hats Off!” [“His mother, inculcating a moral lesson, bids him to remember that it is not the coat that makes the gentleman, but the top hat”],^[16] stories regarding the state-funded schools were of different matter: unquestionably reflecting that of a lower societal class. For example, Dr. F.H. Spencer described twenty schools he visited while in the Midland country

Fifteen of them...ought to be blown up... Half of them had no internal water supply at all... Not one school had a hall... There were few schools in the north of England where heating was adequate... Children were often too cold to be educated.^[17]

Although the *Times* supports that “the investment [to repair schools] would be one of permanent value,” it clearly gears its articles toward middle to upper class membership as it printed hundreds of articles regarding public schools.^[18] One reader addresses the editor of the *Times*,

The weakness of the public school system is its class basis, and that it would make for a healthier social community if this could be widened... If it [public school education] is valuable, then it should be made as widely accessible as possible, but this could only be done by the expenditure of public money.^[19]

The same subscriber mentions that the public schoolboy of the 1930s “does not walk into a job just as he used to” but has to enter the arena of life just as others while competing “with his fellows from every type of school.”^[20]

The outbreak of World War II left many unemployed males in England without any opportunity to educationally advance. The *Times* discloses their opinion in a 1939 article, “Many employers have already declared that they cannot take boys of eighteen who are likely to be called away [for military service] just when they are becoming useful to their firms.”^[21] If the boy cannot earn a living and if his parents cannot afford further education, what is he to do? Four years earlier, in October of 1935, the number of unemployed persons between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one years of age in Liverpool was over 13,200. As the *Times* projected, “In the immediate future the numbers are likely to be considerably increased owing to the high-birth rates in the years following the War.”^[22] One method to decrease the unemployed among the young was to increase the school-leaving age.

The most profound impact upon education in the 1930s was the passage of a national system of education. To assist society as a whole, three essential elements were provided. First, it granted nursery and infant education for children through the age of seven. Next, junior education was provided to students up through the age of eleven, and finally, post-primary education was provided up to the age of fifteen years of age.^[23] This was a significant change from the Education Act passed in 1918, which fixed the school-leaving age at fourteen.^[24] The *Times* noted the new system of national education “would add to the efficiency of our industrial system: it may help to bridge the gulf now fixed between one class of the population and another.”^[25]

The educational system in Britain was in need of change because its new industrialized society could not survive without educated labour. The educational system flourishes once it is recognized that it (education) prepares

not for Utopia but for the world; it must serve the community as well as the individual. Throughout the 1930's Britain's class distinctions were evident, however improvements were later made in the state-funded schools. The *Times* laments their opinion

The nation of to-day faces prospects for which education must make full provision: it cannot disregard international anarchy, low physical standards, and the plight of the juvenile unemployed, to mention only three of the tragedies of this generation. ^[26]

Of course, even today, the secret of training for such citizenship had/has not yet been fully discovered. According to the *Times*, such training can not come from books, sermons, or lessons, but instead, it will be achieved by effort, moral and physical strength. Finally, the *Times* contends

This is the next great task for the educational system: to provide from childhood through adolescence an education for the body which will also educate the spirit in self-discipline, self-respect, and willing service.

There could be no greater task for a Ministry than this. ^[27]

Consequently, by the close of the 1930s, the *Times* begins to advocate a new consideration on the subject of education. Whereas the once staunch patrons of the wealthy classes and expensive public schools, the *Times* enters its support upon new changes and improvements in England's educational arena. Although change can be seen as both negative and positive, Orwell suggests that the pathways to this change were not so bad after all. As Orwell writes, "especially as I sometimes saw in my childhood before the war, when England was still prosperous--that reminds me that our age has not been altogether a bad one to live in" (118).

^[1] All references to *The Road to Wigan Pier* are parenthetical. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, (New York, 1937), 10.

^[2] W.L. Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today: 1830 to the Present*, (Lexington, 1996), 93.

^[3] "Public School Expenses," in *The Times*, (10 Aug. 1932), 6.

^[4] "Secondary School Fees Again," *The Times*, (24 Sept. 1932), 11.

^[5] "Public Schools and the Poor," *The Times*, (20 April 1935), 8.

^[6] "Secondary School Fees Again," *The Times*, (24 Sept. 1932), 11.

^[7] *The Times*, (21 Feb. 1999), 9.

^[8] "Teachers' Laments," *The Times*, (19 April 1933), 13.

^[9] "The Day Continuation System," *The Times*, (7 Jan. 1935), 13d.

^[10] "Education for the Unemployed," *The Times*, (5 May 1933), 11d.

^[11] "English Spirit in Education," *The Times*, (4 Jan. 1932), 12b.

^[12] "Spirit of the Public Schools: Lord Middleton's Tribute," *The Times*, (6 March 1933), 14.

^[13] Ibid.

^[14] "Value of Public Schools," *The Times*, (2 May 1933), 16.

^[15] "The Old-School Tie" Spirit," *The Times*, (12 Jan. 1939), 10.

^[16] "Hat's Off!," *The Times*, (14 Oct. 1939), 9.

^[17] "School Environment" in *The London Times*, (8 Jan. 1937), 14.

^[18] "School Environment" in *The London Times*, (8 Jan. 1937), 14.

^[19] "Public Schools: To the Editor of the Times" in *The London Times*, (6 April 1935), 8.

^[20] "Public Schools: To the Editor of the Times" in *The London Times*, (6 April 1935), 8.

^[21] "Service After School" in *The London Times*, (24 Nov. 1939), 9c.

^[22] "Young Persons and Unemployment: Serious Problem in Liverpool" in *The London Times*, (26 Feb. 1935), 11g.

^[23] "A National System of Education: Stages Outlined by Head Teachers" in *The London Times*, (18 May 1939), 18d.

^[24] "Schooling After Fourteen" in *The London Times*, (12 Jan. 1935), 13c.

^[25] "How Many Years at School?" in *The London Times*, (21 Feb. 1935), 13e.

^[26] "A New Deal for Youth" in *The London Times*, (10 April 1939), 11d.

^[27] "A New Deal for Youth" in *The London Times*, (10 April 1939), 11d.