*The Social Structure of the British Diplomatic Service, 1815-1914**

by Ray JONES**

I

The homogeneity of the social structure of the diplomatic service has often provoked comment — all of it negative, because the service has been portrayed as the last refuge of a redundant aristocracy. From the criticisms of John Bright in the 1850s through to the strictures of the Fabian writer Richard Nightingale in the 1920s and down to the indictments of the historian of British commercial policy, D. C. M. Platt, the verdict has been pronounced and the victim declared guilty.

John Bright's famous speech at Birmingham on 29 October 1858 was an isolationist appeal for the abolition of foreign policy. He advanced his argument by asserting that the only beneficiaries of 150 years of British foreign policy had been the aristocracy.

> The more you examine this matter the more you will come to the conclusion which I have arrived at that this foreign policy, this regard for "the liberties of Europe", this care at one time for "the Protestant interest", this excessive love for "the balance of power" is neither more nor less than a gigantic system of outdoor relief for the aristocracy of Great Britain. (Great laughter)[1]

Though Bright failed to abolish foreign policy, he did succeed in encapsulating the social structure of the diplomatic service within a phrase. Fifty years later the advocates of the democratic control of foreign policy took up Bright's charges. Bright had attacked aristocratic government in general, but now Arthur Ponsonby argued that the diplomatic service had remained immune from the changes that had democratized the House of Commons.[2] Robert Nightingale's subsequent analysis of the social structure of the diplomatic service was designed to give statistical support to Ponsonby's charge.[3] Nightingale was careful to assert only that "the British Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service have been a preserve for the sons of the

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** Department of History, Carleton University.

[1] *Selected Speeches of Rt. Hon John Bright, M.P.* (London: J. M. Dent, 1907), p. 204.

[2] Arthur PONSONBY, *Democracy and Foreign Policy* (London: Methuen, 1915).

[3] R. T. NIGHTINGALE, "The Personnel of the British Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service, 1851-1929", *American Political Science Review*, XXIV (1930): 310-31.

aristocratic, rentier and professional classes."[4] Other commentators have been less cautious. They have drawn on Nightingale's work and one other piece of evidence, the McDonnell Royal Commission's survey of the educational and family background of Foreign Office and diplomatic service candidates between 1898 and 1913.[5]

The result is that C. R. Middleton's conclusion for the early part of the century is basically the same as that of Z. S. Steiner and V. Cromwell for the period before 1914. We are told that the diplomatic service "remained the preserve of the aristocracy",[6] and that "the aristocratic bias of the Diplomatic Service was in no way modified by the last years of peace".[7] The most comprehensive statement of this kind comes from D. C. M. Platt who has observed that "the Foreign Service from the ministers down to the junior clerks and attachés was traditionally aristocratic".[8]

The re-evaluation presented here, as far as it deals with the first half of the nineteenth century, is concerned to do more than simply tabulate diplomatists by social origin; to do this would be to fall into rather obvious traps, for if the diplomatic service is to be characterized as aristocratic, it must be done in relation to various external rather than internal criteria. The diplomatic service was a part of the parliamentary, governmental and political élite of early Victorian society and an aristocratic designation must rest upon an analysis that shows the service to have been more aristocratic than the general run of that élite. If it were possible, comparisons should be made with comparable services such as colonial administration or with the diplomatic services of the major great powers, but in the absence of comparable statistics it is enough to begin the analysis by taking a close look at the basic social structure of the entire service. When that is revealed, a comparison can be made with the governing élite.

The primary source of biographical information on the diplomatic service is the Foreign Office List.[9] The early editions do not give complete or even reliable information on the diplomats who served before 1852. The Foreign Office records themselves are incomplete for the early part of the century.[10] None of these sources give much information beyond the official career. The Foreign Office Librarian, Sir Edward Hertslet, at

[4] Ibid., p. 329.

[5] *British Parliamentary Papers, 1914-1916* [7749], Appendix LXXXIV, pp. 306-7. This Appendix is reprinted in Zara S. STEINER, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy 1898-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), Appendix 3, pp. 217-21.

[6] C. R. MIDDLETON, *The Administration of British Foreign Policy, 1782-1846* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1977), p. 258.

[7] Z. S. STEINER and V. CROMWELL, "The Foreign Office before 1914: A Study in Resistance", in *Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth-Century Government*, ed.: Gillian SUTHERLAND (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), p. 186.

[8] D. C. M. PLATT, *Finance, Trade and Politics in British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. *xxvi*.

[9] *The Foreign Office List for 1852 etc.*, ed. by F. W. CAVENDISH and E. HERTSLET (London, 1852 etc.)

[10] A survey of these records may be found in S. T. BINDOFF's Alexander Prize Essay, "The Unreformed Diplomatic Service, 1812-60", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, XVIII (1935): 171-72, General note on sources.

one time attempted to include in the Foreign Office List personal information, but was forced to withdraw an entire edition when "a certain Foreign Office official objected to a statement that he was 'cousin of a Duke'".[11] In addition to the Royal Historical Society's *British Diplomatic Representatives, 1789-1852*[12] there are four other published lists of Foreign Office clerks which include many diplomats.[13] However, the incompleteness of the official record and the inconsistencies and inaccuracies of the early nineteenth-century biographical literature have not prevented the reconstruction of the anatomy of the unreformed diplomatic service. Enough information has been gathered to make possible valid generalizations.

Between 1815 and 1860 the British government was represented overseas by no fewer than 391 individuals in all the various capacities of service ranging from unpaid attaché through the secretarial grades to minister or ambassador.[14] The British aristocracy consists of a peerage whose degree of nobility is ranked as dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts and barons. Distinguished from the peerage, but also possessing hereditary titles, is the baronetage. Those diplomats who did not possess a hereditary title even though they may have been members of one of the orders of knighthood are listed as commoners, amongst whom we distinguish the gentry with landed possessions. It makes very little sense to restrict our aristocratic diplomatists to the actual holders of hereditary titles for younger sons who bear the courtesy title of Honourable are just as much a part of the aristocracy as their fathers. The rule followed, therefore, is that of Guttsman who, in his *British Political Elite*, included among his aristocrats all those who were descended from a holder of a hereditary title in the grandparent generation.[15] This means that while the younger sons of the aristocracy are included, new creations are excluded for two generations. These exclusions are not statistically significant, for many of the holders of new titles were themselves of aristocratic origin and the purpose of the exclusion is to measure the importance of the aristocracy as part of the traditional ruling élite.

[11] Sir E. HERTSLET, *Recollections of the Old Foreign Office* (London: John Murray, 1901), p. 248.

[12] *British Diplomatic Representatives, 1789-1852*, ed. by S. T. BINDOFF, E. F. MALCOLM SMITH and C. K. WEBSTER, Camden Third Series, Vol. L (London: Royal Historical Society, 1934).

[13] *Public Record Office Handbooks, No. 13, The Records of the Foreign Office 1782-1939* (London: H.M.S.O., 1969), Appendix 1, "Foreign Office Clerks 1782-1851", pp. 151-55; RAY JONES, *The Nineteenth-Century Foreign Office: An Administrative History*, L.S.E. Research Monograph No. 9 (London, 1971), Appendix C, "Biographical Information on Foreign Office Clerks, 1824-1906", pp. 165-88; MIDDLETON, *British Foreign Policy*, Appendix 1, "The Personnel of the Foreign Office 1782-1846", pp. 260-320; *Foreign Office Officials 1782-1870*, compiled by J. M. COLLINGE (London: Athlone Press, 1979).

[14] I have adopted a precise definition of what constituted a diplomat. Thus those people who represented Great Britain to the Persian Court in this period but who were jointly appointed by the Foreign Office and the Indian Government and recruited from the Indian Civil Service are excluded as are those consuls who, while remaining consuls in Latin America, were designated as chargé d'affaires and consul general and fulfilled in that capacity some political function.

[15] W. L. GUTTSMAN, *The British Political Elite* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1963), p. 77, footnote 2.

Table 1. — THE BRITISH DIPLOMATIC SERVICE, 1815-1860, BY SOCIAL ORIGIN (370 of 391).

Social Origin	*Number*	*% of Total*
Aristocrats:	203	52
Peers	169	43
Baronets	34	9
Commoners:	167	43
Landed Gentry	55	14
Other Commoners	112	29

Table 1 shows that the diplomatic service was a predominantly aristocratic body, with over fifty percent of the diplomatists possessing close connections with hereditary titles, but equally of note is the fact that slightly more than one-quarter possessed neither hereditary titles nor close connections with the aristocracy or with the landed gentry. It is clearly not the case that the service was socially exclusive and this becomes even more apparent when an analysis is made of parental occupation (Table 2) in addition to that of social class.

Table 2. — PARENTAL OCCUPATION OF 365 DIPLOMATISTS, 1815-1860.

Parental Occupation	*Number*	*% of Total*
Parliament and Government	85	21
Diplomatic Service	37	9
Army and Navy	59	15
Professions (Church, Civil Service, Law and Medicine)	55	14
Commerce and Industry	9	2
Aristocrats and Landed Gentry with no Professional Careers	120	30

Of 173 aristocrats, 106, that is sixty-one percent, followed one or other professional occupation. Of the 86 members of the landed gentry and baronetage, 45, that is fifty-two percent, were also actively engaged in earning a living by other means than simple possession of acres. So that by excluding those aristocrats and landed gentry who followed a professional career, only thirty percent of our diplomats came from an exclusively landed background, and only 78, amounting to twenty percent, of the total entry into the service in the first half of the nineteenth century came from an exclusively landed aristocratic background. In looking at those with commoners' background, and without attaching too much significance to actual cases, it might be noted that Sir Edward Thornton's father was an innkeeper, and that the father of Robert Liston Elliot (the Oriental Secretary at Constantinople) was a chemist and druggist of Fenchurch Street, London.

Table 3 gives the educational background of these same 391. In spite of an exhaustive search, over a hundred diplomatists failed to appear in any school or university register. The assumption must be made that on the whole they received a private education, for the searches in the registers are conclusive for the schools examined.

Table 3. — EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF DIPLOMATISTS, 1815-1860 (220 OF 391).

Major Public Schools	*Number*	*% of Total Number of Recruits*	*% of Those Who Attended the Major Public Schools*
Eton	105	27	49
Harrow	36	9	17
Westminster	18	5	8
Rugby	16	4	7
Charterhouse	11	—	—
Stoneyhurst	7	—	—
Winchester	5	—	—

These were the only schools with more than two representatives. Schools with two are Haileybury, Christ's Hospital, Oscott, Bath, Bury Grammar School and Felsted. Schools with one old boy diplomatist are Tonbridge, Loretto, Cheam, York Grammar School, Sandy Mount, Merchant Taylor's, Kimbolton, Glenalmond, King Edward VI (Birmingham), Marlborough, and Cheltenham. Those who were presumably educated privately or perhaps attended schools other than major public schools total 171 (45 percent).

The overwhelming predominance of Eton in the education of these diplomats as compared to the other major schools can be partly explained by the sheer size of Eton's enrolment, for it was nearly twice as large as its nearest rival. From the point of view of social exclusivity a further look at Etonian diplomats (Table 4) might be revealing for it may be too readily assumed that Eton is the exclusive aristocratic school.[16]

Table 4. — SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF ETONIAN DIPLOMATISTS, 1815-1860.

Social Background	*Number*
Aristocrats	65
Peers	56
Baronets	9
Commoners	40
Landed Gentry	20
Other Commoners	20

[16] T. W. BAMFORD, "Public Schools and Social Class 1801-1850", *British Journal of Sociology*, XII (1961): 224-35, ranks the major public schools according to social prestige as Eton, Harrow, Winchester, Westminster, Rugby, Charterhouse, Shrewsbury and St. Paul's.

Although Eton may have been both the most aristocratic English public school and the school of origin of more diplomatists than any other, these figures show conclusively that Eton produced diplomatists from among aristocrats and commoners in exactly the same ratio as the service at large, i.e. six to four. Carrying this argument forward, it is possible to assert that an Eton education facilitated the upward social mobility of commoners who had been successful in professional life. Among the Eton-educated commoner diplomats were Stratford Canning, V. Drummond, H. Labouchère, whose fathers had banking interests; F. Ford, A. G. Fullerton and P. Pennefather, whose fathers were lawyers; Woodbine Parish and F. G. Foster, whose fathers were civil servants; J. F. Clark and J. F. Crampton, whose fathers were medical doctors; E. Ellice, the son of the fur trader and W. H. Wood, the son of an East India proprietor, as well as many whose fathers had pursued successful military careers.

It is not very surprising to find that the university background of early nineteenth-century diplomatists seems to have served more of a social purpose than an intellectual preparation for diplomacy. Approximately one-half, 183 (47 percent), attended the ancient universities, mostly at Oxford, 96 (25 percent) and at Cambridge, 74 (19 percent). A significant minority, eleven, attended Trinity College, Dublin, while one attended Durham. Even taking into consideration that both Oxford and Cambridge had scarcely begun to offer their students any real inducements towards intellectual attainment, it is still surprising to find that of these 183 students, only eight achieved significant university distinctions.[17] The great majority never looked to compete either in Honours schools or even in pass programmes and were content to come down possessing the bare matriculation standard. The social composition of the university alumni of the diplomatic service is in the same proportions, six to four (104/183 aristocrats to 79/183 commoners), as in the service at large. Before condemning diplomatists as dunderheads, it is necessary to evaluate their general performance in terms of the overall level of achievement of students coming from the same social class. Thanks to the work of Hester Jenkins and D. Caradog Jones,[18] this is possible in the case of Cambridge University alumni. Their work has concluded that Cambridge alumni who were the sons of the "land owning class", i.e. the aristocracy and landed gentry, failed to distinguish themselves at the university as compared to other groups, but still succeeded in gaining distinction later in life. Approximately forty to fifty percent went down from Cambridge without taking a degree and a high proportion of the rest only obtained a third class degree but at least half went on to achieve positions of some distinction. Of the seventy-five Cambridge University diplomats, no fewer than forty appear

[17] Strangford took a gold medal at Dublin; Thornton was third wrangler at Cambridge in 1789; Vaughan, Bligh and Villiers were elected Fellows of Oxford Colleges; and Monson, Wodehouse and Herbert took first class honours degrees.

[18] Hester JENKINS and D. CARADOG JONES, "Social Class of Cambridge University Alumni of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", *British Journal of Sociology*, I (1950): 93-116.

not to have taken any degree at all and only two achieved academic distinction. These comparisons indicate that the diplomatists' educational background was broadly similar to the general standards achieved by all those in a similar social class.

It has not been too difficult to show the inadequacy of the simple equation between aristocracy and diplomacy, but if it can be shown that the diplomatic service possessed significantly more aristocrats than the Westminster political élite our conclusions will have to be modified. In *The British Political Elite* (Table III, p. 41), W. L. Guttsman gives the social character of the House of Commons in 1831, 1841-47 and 1865. These figures are included in Table 5 below.

Table 5. — The Nobility in Parliament and the Diplomatic Service (% of Total).

Members of the Nobility	*House of Commons*			*Diplomatic Service*
	1831	*1841-47*	*1865*	*1815-60*
Aristocrats (Baronets, Irish Peers, Sons of Peers and Baronets)	33	38	31	52
Gentry (by Descent and Other Relations of Aristocrats)	—	34	45	14
Total	—	72	76	66

The diplomatic service, by these figures, was certainly no more nor less aristocratic than the traditional political élite as measured by membership of the House of Commons. Guttsman's division of aristocrats and gentry is by no means as precise as mine, as he includes among his gentry other relations of aristocrats. This, along with the fact that Guttsman's first category excludes the holders of English titles who sit in the House of Lords while there are many holders of titles included among the diplomats, explain the different proportions as among aristocrats and landed gentry. The total comparison of an average of perhaps as high as seventy-four percent aristocrats and landed gentry is higher than the sixty-six percent of aristocrats and landed gentry in the diplomatic service.

If aristocratic bias does not distinguish the diplomatic service from the general political élite, it only remains to examine the assertions that there was a predilection for aristocratic ambassadors, and that their attachés were their pleasure-seeking dilettante sons. Both of these assumptions are susceptible to statistical analysis. It is a rather obvious fact that the diplomatic service is primarily composed of heads of missions. Comparatively few of our 391 diplomatists aspired to the imposing heights of ambassador, but of those twenty-three men in this period who achieved that rank no fewer than twenty were aristocrats. The three commoners who reached the pinnacle of the profession were George Canning who was not a professional diplomat, occupying the Portuguese embassy in 1814-15 as a temporary refuge from political life, and Sir Robert Liston and Stratford Canning, who occupied the politically important but socially

distant non-European outpost at Constantinople. A far larger number of diplomatists became envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary between 1815 and 1860. Of these sixty-six other leading diplomatists, forty-seven were aristocrats. The nineteen commoners were located in such out of the way places as Peking (Rutherford Alcock), Rio de Janeiro (W. D. Christie, E. Thornton and J. Hudson), Bogota (Turner), Washington (S. Canning and C. R. Vaughan), and the most northerly European court at Stockholm (Disbrowe, Cartwright, Bloomfield and Vesey-Fitzgerald). The only commoners to have occupied one of the more important European missions during this time were Rose and Taylor at Berlin and Aston at Madrid. Of all the commoners who became envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary only one, Stratford Canning, subsequently became an ambassador.

Given that ambassadorial rank was often considered to be nearly equivalent to a post in the cabinet, a comparison can be made between cabinet members and ambassadors. Guttsman's figures[19] for cabinet members between 1830 and 1868 are given in the left, those of ambassadors for the same period, in the right hand column of Table 6.

Table 6. — CABINET MEMBERS AND AMBASSADORS, BY OCCUPATIONAL ORIGIN, 1830-1868.

Occupational Origin	*Cabinet Members*		*Ambassadors*	
	Number	*% of Total*	*Number*	*% of Total*
Large Territorial Lords and their Sons	56	54	10	50
Country Gentlemen (Lesser Landowners)	12	12	2	10
Mercantile and Administrative Upper Class *(Rentiers)*	21	20	7	35
Hommes Nouveaux (Mostly Lawyers)	14	14	1	5
Total	103	100	20	100

The striking affinity between these two sets of figures makes it necessary once more to qualify the previous evidence, for although ambassadors may have been aristocrats in the very broad sense of that word, when they are considered in relation to Guttsman's more precise categories for cabinet ministers, their social antecedents appear to be almost identical.

The family embassy of the early nineteenth century employed the services of unpaid attachés to perform the routine work of the chancery. These attachés have generally been described as young aristocrats completing, as it were, their education by using the European missions as a sort of European finishing school before they assumed their proper role either in London political life or County society. No one can be quite

[19] GUTTSMAN, *British Political Elite*, Table II, "The Social Structure of Cabinet Membership, 1830-68", p. 38.

sure how many attachés served in the British diplomatic service in these years, but in my researches I have uncovered 312 young men who served in this capacity. Of these, 189 (60 percent) were aristocrats and 123 (40 percent) were commoners. A total of 101 resigned their positions when still attachés and of these 101, 65 aristocrats resigned along with 36 commoners. Thus the proportion of resignations among aristocrats and commoners remains almost exactly the same and does not bear out the assumption that the aristocratic attachés who had other interests were mere dilettante diplomats while the commoners entered the service with more professional intentions.[20]

Undoubtedly both of these types existed and it might be useful to look at the background and expectations of some of these gilded youths of early nineteenth-century diplomacy. Palmerston, in the mid-1830s, was asked to appoint to attachéships both of the sons of General Sir Alexander Duff, M.P. James Duff was the heir to the Earldom of Fife and as Palmerston's correspondent was careful to point out, a favour from the government would secure Banffshire to the Liberal cause in the next election.[21] In consequence, Palmerston gave appointments to both the Duff boys: James served for a time at Paris before he was duly elected M.P. for Banffshire in the Liberal interest a year later; his younger brother served a rather longer time as attaché at Vienna and Paris before in turn becoming Member of Parliament for Elgin. Much the same arguments were applied by the friends of Robert Gaussen to secure him a temporary appointment in 1836. William Cowper wrote to Palmerston that

> the Hertfordshire Whigs, Lord Melbourne included, are very anxious that you should appoint Mr. Gaussen to be an Attaché. He is son in law to Bosanquet who was Secretary of Legation at Madrid. He does not intend to devote his life to the service but only a few years while his estate gets round and may in time rise to £5 or £6,000 a year. He has no politics but the appointment would make him a Whig for life.[22]

From the narrow perspective of the interests of the service these men may have been dilettantes but taking a wider context their service probably constituted as good a grounding as any for a life of public service.

The predominance of aristocrats in the major embassies and missions can be explained partly by the known preference of aristocratic European courts for long and distinguished pedigrees, but the pressure and influence that the most important political families could put on the Secretary of State and his cabinet colleagues when top appointments were being considered were perhaps more important. In the context of this analysis it must be pointed out that the expectations of career diplomats with little political influence were decidedly limited. They became the workhorses of the profession in out of the way places. For these people, the prime

[20] BINDOFF, "Unreformed Diplomatic Service", p. 148 has different figures. I have identified more attachés and fewer resignations. Part of an explanation is that Bindoff has included resignations of paid attachés, which I exclude.

[21] National Register of Archives, Broadlands Mss, Pat/H/22, Pat/D/50, Pat/H/25.

[22] Ibid., Pat/C/138, 8 March 1836.

consideration was to retain the interest of those under whom they served, as James Bandinell advised John Bidwell in 1810 when Bidwell was serving in Constantinople as secretary to Robert Adair.

> If you think you run a risk of losing or weakening Adair's friendship by remaining after he went away, I would not have you stay upon any consideration thinking as I do that Adair's friendship is more to be cultivated than Canning's ... With regard to what I have said about the friendship of Adair and of Canning, I take it that supposing Strat. Canning to be a very rising man, yet young men as they rise each step of the ladder are apt to shake off old friendships as it were a weight which prevents their elevation, while a man of a certain standard admits more steadily a protecting influence. [23]

A typical workhorse was John Henry Mandeville. Born in Suffolk and originally intended for the Royal Navy, Mandeville served twenty years as unpaid attaché before receiving £150 per annum at Frankfurt in 1822. Although he occupied important intermediate positions in the Embassies at Paris, Lisbon and Constantinople in the 1820s and in spite of being considered by his superiors as active, trustworthy and intelligent, he was without the necessary friends in high places and never rose beyond a South American Minister Residency. He was pensioned off in December 1844 as being old and with no influence at his court. Charles Townshend Barnard, the son of a clergyman and grandson of a former Provost of Eton, which doubtless explains his presence as a pupil at that school, served as an attaché for ten years before his appointment as Secretary of Legation at Dresden in 1824. He never received further promotion and actually retained his post in South Germany until his death in 1878. A third example from among many others is that of Percy Doyle. The youngest son of General Sir C. W. Doyle, he was first attached to the mission at Washington in 1825. Constant pressure from his family on various secretaries of state and the good opinion of those under whom he served failed to get Doyle any significant promotion, other than tardy recognition in the 1850s as Minister Plenipotentiary in Mexico. His health failed him in Mexico in 1856 and he resigned but his brother made a last unavailing appeal to Malmesbury for a European mission two years later. [24]

It is important to emphasize once again that the simplistic research of Nightingale upon which so many assumptions have been made about the aristocratic nature of the diplomatic service is inadequate. If the service was drawn predominantly from the aristocracy, the ratio of aristocrats to commoners — six to four — is not overwhelming and the diplomats shared exactly the same social background as England's political élite of the early nineteenth century. Though this élite was aristocratic it is too often forgotten that it was a working aristocracy and for a great many of the "mere saunterers" and "dilettante diplomatists" the attachéship served as a general political apprenticeship. The major European embassies were staffed almost exclusively by aristocrats; their positions were not necessarily and exclusively a function of their aristocratic antecedents.

[23] Public Record Office, FO 95/8/4, Bandinell to Bidwell, 14 March 1810.

[24] Broadlands Mss, Pat/D/48, 49, 51; Hampshire County Record Office, Malmesbury Mss, Col. North to Malmesbury, 28 March 1858.

II

If the unreformed diplomatic service reflected in its social composition the general political élite of English society as represented by membership of the House of Commons, that political élite was not static, and the question that remains to be answered is how far did the reformed diplomatic service continue to conform to the pattern of the early nineteenth century. The total number of career diplomatists who entered the service between 1860 and 1914 is 212. Their social origins are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. — THE BRITISH DIPLOMATIC SERVICE, BY SOCIAL ORIGIN, 1860-1914 (210 OF 212).

Social Origin	*Number*	*% of Total*
Aristocrats:	81	38
Peers	58	27
Baronets	23	11
Commoners:	129	62
Landed Gentry	45	22
Other Commoners	84	40

By comparison with Table 1 it is immediately apparent that the general relationship between aristocrats and commoners in the service changed radically in the late nineteenth century. The proportion of aristocrats dropped from fifty-two percent to below forty percent while that of commoners rose from forty-three percent to over sixty percent of all entries. Even more striking than the general reversing of proportions between aristocrats and commoners is the fact that the percentage of diplomatists without either aristocratic or landed gentry connections had risen from twenty-nine to forty.

In terms of occupational activity it has been possible to collect much more biographical information for this later period and this is summarized in Table 8 below.

Table 8. — PARENTAL OCCUPATION OF 210 DIPLOMATISTS, 1860-1914.

Parental Occupation	*Number*	*% of Total*
Parliament and Government	33	15
Diplomatic Service, Colonial Service and Civil service	37	17
Army and Navy	46	22
Professions	32	16
Commerce and Industry	18	8
Aristocrats, Landed Gentry with no Professional Careers	44	21

As compared to the figures for the earlier period the numbers of aristocrats and landed gentry who followed no career have declined while the numbers in all professional occupations rose with the exception of parliamentary and governmental occupations. Occupational representation was still almost exclusively the preserve of the old established professions and the new wealth of commerce and industry was scantily represented. In the earlier period these latter could be counted on one's fingers and in the later period, although their percentages rose considerably, only 18 of 212 diplomatists came from a commercial or industrial background.

How far these changes in the social structure of the service kept pace with the equally radical shift in the composition of the general political élite can be seen by a comparison with Guttsman's statistics *(The British Political Elite*, Table IV, p. 82), which show the occupations of M.P.s in the Parliaments of 1874, 1880 and 1885. Comparing the actual occupation of M.P.s with the parental occupation of our diplomatists, is perhaps a little forced, but it is a valid showing of the general relationship between the two élites. Guttsman's table shows a column marked "Landowning, *Rentiers*" which he says in a footnote should be taken to read country squires, magistrates, sons of peers, baronets, etc. These may be taken to be equivalent to the last table of parental occupation of diplomatists, i.e. those members of the aristocracy and landed gentry who followed no professional career.

Table 9. — MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT AND DIPLOMATISTS, BY OCCUPATION (% OF TOTAL).

Occupation	*Members of Parliament*				*Diplomatic Service Entrants*
	1874	*1880*	*1885*	*Average of 3*	*1860-1914*
Landowning and rentiers	32	19	16	22	22
Army and Navy	18	13	12	14	22
Civil Service	2	1	—	1	17
Professions	24	26	32	27	6
Commerce and Industry	24	40	38	34	8
Parliament and Government	—	—	—	—	15

This comparative table reveals the somewhat startling fact that the proportion of aristocratic and *rentier* diplomatists was exactly the same as in the general political élite. So that as far as there was a general tendency in late-Victorian society towards more democratic representation in its political élite, that pattern can also be found in the diplomatic service. This was especially true in the long run, for the representation of these classes declined in much the same proportion; that is, from seventy percent in the early nineteenth century to twenty-two percent in the late nineteenth century. What is equally apparent is that while commerce and industry were heavily represented in the late-Victorian House of Commons, they were very tardily represented in the diplomatic service. Contemporary criticism of the social structure of the diplomatic service would have been

better informed and perhaps much more influential if it had been able to focus upon this aspect of recruitment rather than the simplistic and misleading blanket condemnation of the service as a bastion of aristocratic privilege.

Guttsman perceptively notes that education is in many ways a better criterion of social status than membership of titled families or economic background and I now turn to this aspect of our diplomatists' background.

Table 10. — Educational Background of Diplomatists, 1860-1914.

Major Public Schools	*Number*	*% of Total*
Eton	109	51
Harrow	26	12
Winchester	10	5
Wellington	9	4
Rugby	6	3
Charterhouse	5	2

Twelve other schools were represented; the four major Roman Catholic schools sending five of their students into diplomacy, the military schools three, Clifton four, Haileybury three, Blundells one, Fettes one, Rossall one and Cheltenham one. Although public school education had become a fact of life for the upper classes at this time, no less than twenty-two failed to attend any of the major or even minor schools, and must be presumed to have been educated privately. The most striking feature of the educational background of these diplomatists is the overwhelming predominance amongst them of Etonians. The tendency for Etonians to dominate entry into the service became stronger as the years passed and in the fourteen years before 1914 of sixty-three new entrants no less than forty-two (67%) were Etonians.

The educational background of diplomatists might be usefully compared to those of M.P.s in 1906 (Table 11).

Table 11. — Educational Background of Members of Parliament and Diplomatists (% of Total).

Education	*Members of Parliament (1906)*		*Diplomatists (1860-1914)*
	Liberal	*Conservative*	
At Eton	8	27	51
At Other Public Schools	25	24	39

The growing divergence between the educational background of diplomatists and the ruling political élite as shown in these figures was almost certainly the result of the peculiar entrance requirements of the service

which divorced diplomatists from the universities and the property qualification which effectively prevented any but "gentlemen" of independent means from considering a foreign service career. The Foreign Office, which did not require a parental subsidy, noticeably recruited abler students from a wider background.

Only slightly more than one half (121 of 212) of the new entrants into the service went on from school to university and of these twice as many went to Oxford (79) as Cambridge (38). The Universities of Paris, Heidelberg and Dublin account for the remaining four university graduates. The list of those who attained first class distinction is small enough to be given in full: Le Strange, Raikes, Muller, Eliot, Herbert, Waterlow, Percy, Liston and Rendel. In the thirty years after 1870, the demands of the entrance examination for fluency in modern languages drove the majority of candidates straight from school to France and Germany and thence to Scoone's crammer in Garrick Street to prepare for the examination. Although it was possible in the earlier period to show that, for the sons of the upper class, university distinctions were not a necessary prerequisite to success in later life, the rules of the game were radically altered in the 1850s and the civil service became a career open to talents. The Class I Civil Service Examination became highly competitive and the administrative grade of the civil service formed an intellectual élite. While it may have been true before 1900 that the Foreign Office generally recruited more able people than the diplomatic service and that the Home Civil Service recruited more able people than both branches of the foreign service, that was no longer the case in the years before 1914. Everyone who has looked at this question has taken at face value Francis Hurst's assertion before the McDonnell Commission that no Oxford man of any distinction had ever contemplated going into the Foreign Office. In actual fact, the new entrants into the foreign service between 1907 and 1914 did better, that is obtained a higher percentage of marks, than the average of the Class I entrants into the home and Indian civil services.[25]

That career progress in diplomacy was dependent upon social class is perhaps the most widely held assumption made about the diplomatic service. Nightingale's figures, which show that between 1851 and 1929 the proportion of aristocrats was higher in the more important than in the less important diplomatic posts, appear to support this assumption. Thirty-five of sixty-six ambassadors were aristocrats, and the proportion of aristocrats who served as envoys was only seventy-three of 194. I have reworked these figures. In the period 1860 to 1914 there were thirty-one career diplomats who attained the rank of ambassador; nineteen were aristocrats, five came from landed gentry families and seven were commoners. Of those who were initially appointed after 1860, ten managed to reach the rank of ambassador before 1914. Of these ten, only four were aristocrats, four others came from the landed gentry and two were commoners. It was a common characteristic of late nineteenth-century cabinet members

[25] *British Parliamentary Papers, 1914-1916* [7749], XI. Evidence of Leathes, Q. 38694-96.

to come from a more aristocratic and restricted social background than the general run of M.P.s. Cabinet ministers[26] are compared to ambassadors in Table 12.

Table 12. — ARISTOCRATS AS CABINET MINISTERS (1886-1916) AND AS AMBASSADORS (1860-1914).

Office	*Number*	*% of Total*
Liberal Cabinet Ministers	23	43
Conservative Cabinet Ministers	26	55
Ambassadors	19	61

In the period 1830 to 1868, as I have shown, an even closer relationship existed between the two groups (Table 6). In comparing the two periods, it is apparent that the percentage of aristocratic ministers declined slightly while that of aristocratic ambassadors increased slightly. However, since the status of ambassadors in the later period was declining, it is perhaps more appropriate to compare ambassadors with the equivalent senior positions in the Home Civil Service. Again, Guttsman provides the basis for comparison in his Second XI Table.[27]

Table 13. — UNDER SECRETARIES (1868-1945) AND DIPLOMATISTS (1851-1929), BY SOCIAL ORIGIN.

Social Class	*Under Secretaries*		*Diplomatists: Envoys*	
	Number	*% of Total*	*Number*	*% of Total*
Aristocracy	58	54	73	38
Middle Class	39	37	—	—
Working Class	10	9	—	—
Total	107	100	194	100

Social Class	*Diplomatists*			
	Ambassadors		*Representatives in 11 Countries*	
	Number	*% of Total*	*Number*	*% of Total*
Aristocracy	35	53	108	42
Middle Class	—	—	—	—
Working Class	—	—	—	—
Total	66	100	260	100

These striking figures, which show that the seniors of the Home Civil Service were more aristocratic than the seniors of the diplomatic service, should finally destroy the myth that the diplomatic service was a gigantic system of outdoor relief for the aristocracy. Not for one moment should it be

[26] GUTTSMAN, *British Political Elite*, Table XII, "Cabinet Ministers, 1886-1916: Background and Occupation", p. 102.

[27] NIGHTINGALE, "Personnel of the British Foreign Office", p. 319; GUTTSMAN, *British Political Elite*, Table XVI, "Background of Under-Secretaries, 1868-1945", p. 108.

denied that the service was predominantly aristocratic, but it was not exclusively so. As this type of question always needs a relative qualification, the obvious comparison is with the general ruling élite of British society, which shows conclusively that the one was no more aristocratic than the other.

The change in the social composition of the ruling élite as Britain became more industrial and democratic inevitably wore down the former aristocratic stranglehold on political power but this was matched by an equal decline in aristocratic representation in the diplomatic service. What is important to notice in this change is that whereas the political élite came to represent the new industrial bases of power, the diplomatic service failed to attract very many of these "new" men into its ranks. The most telling statistic of all those contained in this paper is the contrast between the thirty-four percent of M.P.s of the three Parliaments of 1874, 1880 and 1885 with a commercial or industrial background and the meagre eight percent figure for the diplomatic service.

Research on European diplomatic services, unfortunately lacking earlier, now makes comparison between the social background of one country's diplomatists and that of another's possible. In the case of Imperial Germany the work has been done by Lamar Cecil.[28] Reading his book, one is immediately struck by the similarities for noble lineage seems to have been the criterion for admission into the service. Cecil's calculations[29] are complete and summarized on the left in Table 14 and set against the figures from Table 7.

Table 14. — PRUSSIAN (1871-1914) AND BRITISH (1860-1914) DIPLOMATISTS, BY SOCIAL ORIGIN.

Social Origin	*Prussian Diplomatists, New Entrants*		*Social Origin*	*British Diplomatists*	
	Number	*% of Total*		*Number*	*% of Total*
Nobles	275	69	Aristocrats	81	38
Old East Prussian	84	21	Peers	58	27
Old West Prussian	19	5	Baronets	23	11
New East Prussian	39	10			
New West Prussian	9	2	Landed Gentry	45	22
Other German	119	30			
Non-German	5	1			
Bourgeois	121	31	Commoners	84	40
Total	396	100	Total	210	100

While it may be safely said as a generalization that the European nobility was a homogeneous group, when it comes down to actual situations, that is not necessarily the case and while the British landed gentry

[28] L. CECIL, *The German Diplomatic Service 1871-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[29] Ibid., Table VII, p. 76.

carried no titles before their names, the small size of the British aristocracy, in comparison to the German, and their possession of hereditary landed property made them to all intents and purposes indistinct from the lower branches of, in this case, the German nobility. Even with the landed gentry added to the percentage of British aristocratic diplomats, the German service recruited ten percent more nobles than the British. Far from being an exclusive aristocratic service, the British service was less aristocratic than the German and I strongly suspect less aristocratic than any of the other Great Powers, with the possible exception of Republican France. Cecil has found some comparative statistics for the French service and shows in a footnote on page 67 that between 1870 and 1914, forty-five percent of French envoys were noble. Nightingale's figures for a slightly longer period, between 1851 and 1929, shows that forty-two percent of heads of missions came from an aristocratic background.

Social exclusivity in the British diplomatic service has remained a problem until the present day,[30] but it would be a mistake to confuse this contemporary problem with the continued presence of the aristocracy in the nineteenth-century service. The separate path pursued by the diplomatic service in relation to the Civil Service has often been commented upon. The Northcote-Trevelyan reforms transformed the Victorian Civil Service. The diplomatic service rejected both open competitive examinations and the division of labour between intellectual and mechanical work. Entry into the diplomatic service remained restricted and subject to a "property qualification". This separate development was not an accident but a conscious decision. The political leadership could have made the diplomatic service conform to the new structure of the Civil Service, but it chose not to do so. This suggests that ministers' perceptions of the diplomatic service and the Civil Service were different. Their perceptions were not conditioned by ignorance but by constant close contact, for the diplomatic service was an integral part of the executive machinery of the government. Just how close that relationship was has been little appreciated. It has gone unnoticed that the senior positions in the diplomatic service continued to change hands along with a change in government long after the Civil Service had become permanent. If that change was complete by 1830, it did not happen in the diplomatic service until the 1860s. Victorian cabinets spent more time discussing foreign policy than any other single issue. Their discussions were based upon the despatches received from diplomats whose appointments they had carefully considered. The appointment of ambassadors was decided at the highest levels of government in discussions between the Sovereign, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary. Quite often diplomats were themselves considered for cabinet positions and as late as 1886 the Prime Minister offered the second place in the cabinet to the Ambassador in Paris. The common social and educational background shared by diplomats and politicians facilitated the

[30] A. N. OPPENHEIM and Ian SMART, "The British Diplomat", in *The Management of Britain's External Relations*, eds: R. BOARDMAN and A. J. R. GROOM (London: Macmillan, 1973).

conduct of foreign policy. It is for these reasons that the aristocracy continued to occupy important positions in the diplomatic service.

Diplomatic historians have added a social dimension to their interpretation of the origins of the First World War. Attention has been focussed on the basic changes that were rapidly transforming the political élite, particularly within the ruling Liberal Party in the years before 1914. As diplomats tended to be both conservative in outlook and Conservative in politics, a certain amount of tension existed between the diplomats and their political masters. The evidence presented here should temper the belief that "there was a sharp and developing social gulf between those who controlled Britain's foreign relations and those shaping the course of home affairs."[31] When subjected to a comparative analysis, the broad generalizations about the aristocratic nature of the service upon which this thesis rests are shown to be both inaccurate and misleading.

RÉSUMÉ.

Cet article fait appel aux techniques de la biographie collective pour analyser les structures sociales du service diplomatique britannique au dix-neuvième siècle. En le comparant aux autres composantes de l'élite politique victorienne, nous dégageons ses structures sociales de fait et non celles qu'il était censé avoir. Nous démontrons que, loin de demeurer une voie de garage pour l'aristocratie, le service diplomatique a subi des transformations semblables à celles qui ont fait de l'ensemble de la fonction publique britannique une élite sur le plan intellectuel.

[31] Z. STEINER, "The Foreign Office, 1905-14", in *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey*, ed.: F. H. HINSLEY (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 66.