Introduction

In 2011 David Cameron was derided by Ed Miliband as ‘Flashman’, that dastardly bounder from *Tom Brown’s School Days*, the 1857 public school novel by Thomas Hughes, who bullied younger boys with a mixture of physical pummelling and verbal laceration. The nickname has stuck, because of a lingering suspicion that public schools still produce men like him. In the original book, and in the bestselling series of novels based on the character by George MacDonald Fraser, Harry Flashman is cursed with many faults: he is arrogant, lacks compassion, abuses his power as an older boy, has a flashy approach to spending his family’s large fortune, and is, to put it mildly, sexist. After expulsion from Rugby School, he becomes an army officer through family help rather than merit, since his father buys him a commission. All these faults have been levelled by their critics at today’s generation of public school old boys; most of them have been levelled at public school old girls. Cameron himself, an Old Etonian, has been attacked for a bullying style in parliamentary debate, a condescending attitude to female politicians, and a lack of concern for the poor. Andrew Mitchell, erstwhile member of Cameron’s cabinet and Old Rugbeian, has been lambasted for a high-handed approach to police officers in an argument over a bicycle, with the claim that he called one of them a ‘pleb’ upheld in a libel
case. At least neither man has, to the relief of their wives, been charged with two of Flashman’s greatest faults: cowardice and philandering. Thank heaven for small mercies.

Even the eponymous hero of Hughes’s novel, set in the 1830s, is hardly an exemplar of the appropriate elite for a modern society. Tom Brown is a morally upstanding boy: brave, kind and loyal to his friends. During the course of the tale, he plays a part in improving the school’s moral tone. However, he attaches little importance to academic work. ‘The question remains whether I should have got most good by understanding Greek particles or cricket thoroughly,’ he muses at the end of the novel as he recalls school days spent largely in playing the latter. ‘I’m such a thick, I never should have had time for both.’ Tom conforms to another popular image of today’s public school old boy: a man more concerned with sport and play than knowledge.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked the nadir of the public schools, a time when boys such as Flashman were given free rein to terrorize the school, and even many well-meaning boys like Tom Brown learned little in the classroom that was useful. Given this, there are two central questions in this book. First, how did the public schools sink into the state described in Tom Brown’s School Days, and in more purely factual accounts of the period? Second, have they improved, since the days of Flashman and Tom Brown, to the point where they are an asset to the nation?

If they have not, Britain is in trouble. More than half of the top medics, civil servants, lawyers, media figures and Conservative MPs went to public school. If these people are being educated in modern versions of Tom Brown’s Rugby, where the bad boys learned habits of cruelty and authoritarianism, and even the good boys thought more of sport than of learning, British society is being led by people who are not up to the job.

Some of the scenes in Tom Brown’s School Days are genuinely harrowing. Most disturbing of all, perhaps, is the passage where Flashman and his partners cruelly roast Tom Brown in front of the
fire, giving him such bad injuries that he is confined to the sick-room for a couple of days. This scene is not exaggerated: junior boys were dangled over the fire at Rugby and other schools. If anything, Hughes is sparing his public from the worst atrocities — roasting was far from the worst thing that happened at the public schools of the period. In 1885 a boy was killed by bullies at King’s College School. As late as 1930, a boy committed suicide because he could no longer face the treatment meted out to ‘fags’, the younger boys who did duties for the older ones, and were often treated by them with appalling callousness or downright sadism. *Tom Brown’s School Days* does not, moreover, look at the most troubling phenomenon of all that was prevalent at the time when it is set: the inclination for senior boys to usurp the authority of the masters themselves through open, organized rebellion.

To see how public schools reached such a bad state, I have travelled back to the very beginning: the founding of Winchester College in 1382. The book then plies a chronological course that leads up to the present day, though certain issues, such as sport, homosexuality, and the schools’ treatment of foreign pupils, are dealt with in a way that spans the centuries, in chapters covering the periods when these issues were most crucial. Chapter Nine looks at future risks to the public schools, with Chapter Ten considering the issue of whether they are, in the present day, a curse or a blessing for society: dangerously dominant or benignly pre-eminent.

From the beginning I need to establish my definition of a public school. ‘Only three people . . . have ever really understood the Schleswig-Holstein business,’ the British politician Lord Palmerston is reported to have said, ‘the Prince Consort, who is dead — a German professor, who has gone mad — and I, who have forgotten all about it.’ Over the past hundred years, it is highly unlikely that as many as three people have understood fully what a public school is, including insiders at the very heart of the system. ‘He is a bold man to-day who ventures to define what is and what is not a public school,’ the Master of Wellington College wrote in 1932. In defiance of such a warning, however, here is my attempt.
This book defines a public school as a school independent of state control which has primarily educated members of the elite, with the purpose of providing, to some of the pupils at least, an academic education aimed at preparing them for university study. Nowadays these schools all charge high fees; in the past some did not, but admission to these schools was still, through patronage, tilted heavily towards the elite. I define ‘elite’ in a broad sense. These days perhaps a tenth of the population may have some hope of paying public school fees. This group includes the upper middle as well as the upper classes, and the well-off as well as the genuinely rich. This is my elite.

The grammar schools are excluded, until they reach the point where their client base resembles that of the public schools. By this definition, many of them, including Oundle and Dulwich College, became public schools in the nineteenth century, when they started basing entry mainly on high fees. Many of the rest became so in the 1970s. Although many grammars are ancient, as public schools they are quite new. King’s School, Canterbury tentatively traces its ancestry back to 597; as a public school, however, it is a relative newcomer; it only became one in the nineteenth century.

The book’s definition of a public school also excludes small establishments which did not last for much longer than the career of the individual who founded them. Occasionally one of them would build a sizeable stable of customers from establishment families, but too few of them for us to consider these schools as training-grounds for the upper echelons. Contemporaries usually described these establishments as ‘private schools’ or ‘academies’, to distinguish them from public and grammar schools, and I have made the same distinction. Girls from the broad elite who were educated at school were, until the late nineteenth century, generally educated at academies aimed at teaching the social graces, with little or no pretence at an academic education. The book charts the change, and the development of girls’ schools from that point on.

In writing this book, I have tried hard, through analysing government and school data, to address a failing common to the bulk of
writing about the public schools: the lack of hard, cold numerical facts to back anecdotal evidence. However, anecdotal evidence is also vitally important. I have sought this by trying to understand the experience of heads, teachers, pupils and governors. Some of their views are buried in history books, in particular the histories of individual schools. Sometimes their experiences are in school archives. I have interviewed many heads and old boys and girls, too – initially during my stint as the Financial Times’ Education Correspondent in the 2000s and more recently when writing this book.

Where possible, I have also visited schools, in an effort to understand the history buried in their walls. During the past two years spent working on this book I have suffered indigestion from the strain of trying to understand Notions, the Winchester College argot, while lunching with the scholars. I have been jostled by unruly boys in a corridor as an entire school rushed to its next lesson after the bell. I have bent my neck far backwards while admiring the detail in the ceiling carvings at Westminster School; I have bent my neck far forwards over governors’ minutes from the era of Tom Brown, while both the archivist and I tried to ignore loud rock music from the adjoining pupil common room and pretend to each other that we had not noticed the noise at all. I have clumsily tried to dissemble when ensconced in the armchair of a majestic study, after a headmaster sought my opinion on whether he or the head of a rival school had a more magnificent room. It has been quite an adventure.

I have also wondered, sometimes, what the characters in Tom Brown’s School Days would make of the public schools I see now. Tom would, I am sure, be heartened by the continued importance of sport. Thomas Arnold, the real-life headmaster of Rugby who also appears in Hughes’s book, would be saddened by the massive decline in the importance of religion at most public schools. Flashman would be appalled by the end of fagging and the decreased power of the older boys. On the other hand, he would probably be pleased by the convenient proximity of women, following the arrival of co-education at the majority of boys’ schools.
What of my own experience of public schools? As a young man I had thought surprisingly little of how I personally had been shaped by my public school education. That changed when I became the Financial Times’ Education Correspondent in 2007. A belated revelation came in 2014, when my family had lunch with the family of a man of roughly my age who had, like me, grown up in the professional classes, won a scholarship at a boys’ public school and gone on from there to Oxbridge. His donnish habit of never answering a question with a simple yes or no, his reticence, and the slightly juvenile streak in his nature that made him get on well with little children made him seem familiar, but I could not think why. Then I realized that he reminded me of myself.

Each nation has different monikers to describe different elite social groups: the US talks of people with the ‘Ivy League patina’, after the top New England colleges; the French talk of the ‘énarques’ – members of the elite who, having been to the select École Nationale d’Administration, have the arrogance of men and women who feel born to rule; the British, by contrast, talk of men shaped much earlier in their education: ‘public school boys’. I believe that the typical ‘public school boy’ has already changed in the couple of decades or so since I left public school, most of all, perhaps, because of the arrival of girls at my school and others. However, my experience one lunchtime reminded me of how the school shapes the boy and the boy is father to the man.

It is now time to read about the schools that still shape more than half of Britain’s elite.
1 Where the public schools began: Chamber Court, one of Winchester College’s original buildings from the fourteenth century.

2 The first image of a public school boy: John Kent, who died while still a scholar at Winchester in 1434. Note the priestly appearance in this memorial brass in a local church.
3 The first public school hero: Sir Philip Sidney, an old boy of Shrewsbury, in pensive mood in this statue on the school's grounds.

5 Making their own devilish entertainment: the arcane and cruel custom of bumping, typical of the barbarous practices of the unreformed public schools of the early nineteenth century.

6 Westminster boys participating in the Pancake Grieze in front of a bemused audience, 1919.
7 The most successful head in public school history? Samuel Butler, who led Shrewsbury from 1798 to 1836.

8 An intense relationship between master and boy, tinged with sexuality: the brilliant Eton housemaster Oscar Browning with George Curzon, future Viceroy of India.

10 Tradition with a hint of menace: Winchester College Football teams arrive on the field of battle.
11 Sporting excellence: Bob Tisdall (far left), gold medal winner in the hurdles at the Los Angeles 1932 Olympics, at Shrewsbury School.

12 Ross Hockey, a form of the sport peculiar to Rossall School in Lancashire.
13 Making men of them: a boy on Sedbergh School’s famously tough Wilson Run, 1917.

14 The magnificent Rugby School Chapel, dating from 1872. Religion played an important role in the moral reformation of many public schools in the nineteenth century.
15 King’s College School prefects in 1898, rather dour and unsmiling.

16 King’s College School prefects of 1996–7, exuding bonhomie. Note the ethnic mix that was absent in the earlier King’s photo.
17 Admirable but humourless: Dorothea Beale, principal of Cheltenham Ladies’ College 1858–1906 and pioneer of academic education for girls.

18 Britomart, the mythical warrior-princess who was Dorothea Beale’s favoured heroine, commemorated in the stained glass windows at Cheltenham Ladies’ College.
19 Cheltenham Ladies’ College girls lining up for prayers in about 1930. The scene testifies to the tightly controlled environments of the girls’ public schools of the time.

20 Roedean senior prefects, 1913. Far less intimidating than the prefect photos of boys’ public schools of the era.
21 Teaching the feminine graces: ‘Sketching Class at the Rose Temple’, from a 1920s prospectus for St James’ School, Worcestershire.

22 A Roedean lacrosse team on a windswept day in 1920. ‘Special pains will be taken to guard against overwork, and from two to three hours daily will be allotted to out-door exercise and games’, its first prospectus noted.
23 Alone with Teddy: a touching photo of a Roedean girl in quite a comfortable-looking, though rather plain, boarding cubicle, 1931.

24 Teddy in luxury: a plush and cheery shared room at modern-day Sedbergh School.
26 The reinvented public school boy: Brendan Bracken (centre), a trusted adviser of Winston Churchill and chairman of the board of governors of Sedbergh. He attended the school as a nineteen-year-old, posing as a fifteen-year-old orphan. In this 1954 photo, Bracken is flanked by General Sir John Stuart Mackenzie Shea GCB KGMG DSO (left) and Headmaster Logie Bruce-Lockhart (right).

25 The first of many: Brighton College’s first girls with the chaplain and his wife, 1974. By the mid-1980s two-thirds of boys’ public schools had female pupils.
27 An early chemistry laboratory at Christ College, Brecon, populated with apparently rather enthusiastic boys, 1909. Christ College took science seriously from the late Victorian era, earlier than was the case for many public schools.

28 ‘Nothing could have been worse for the development of my mind than Dr Butler’s school, as it was strictly classical, nothing else being taught, except a little ancient geography and history.’ Such was Charles Darwin’s assessment of Shrewsbury, which he attended in the early nineteenth century. He is, nevertheless, used heavily in its marketing. This bust of him adorns the school.
29 Training the next military genius: military manoeuvres at Cheltenham College, alma mater of tank pioneer Sir Ernest Swinton and fourteen Victoria Cross holders.

30 An antidote to the Combined Cadet Force: Peace Day at Bootham, the Quaker public school.
31 How times have changed: pupils of both sexes, and all races and colours, cheerily waving to the camera at Downside School.

32 Bird of war: the addition of Black Redstarts, one of which is pecking at the corn, was the only change made to the ceiling carvings of Westminster School’s Busby Library when it was recreated after the Second World War – an acknowledgement of its taste for bombed buildings. A good metaphor for the public schools’ adaptation and evolution over the centuries?