

A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783

By Paul Langford

Introduction

THE expression 'a polite and commercial people' was used by the distinguished academic, MP, and judge, William Blackstone, in his magisterial *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, published between 1765 and 1769.¹ Blackstone is a fitting source for the title of this volume. His lifetime, 1723 to 1780, coincides with the period which it describes, and his varied career touched many of the themes with which it is concerned. But similar terms were commonplace in the 1760s and 1770s, and suggest something of a consensus about the central characteristics of mid-eighteenth-century England. They also correspond well with the images of eighteenth-century life which were transmitted to posterity. Politeness conjures up some familiar features of Georgian society, its civilized if secular outlook, its faith in a measured code of manners, its attachment to elegance and stateliness, its oligarchical politics and aristocratic fashions. Politeness is stamped on the country houses and portraits which for many provide the most vivid introduction to the culture of the eighteenth century. It is to be found in the pages of the standard texts through which modern readers customarily encounter eighteenth-century literature, the *Spectator's* journalism, Pope's poetry, Horace Walpole's letters, Gibbon's history, Burke's rhetoric, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Johnson's own *Lives of the Poets*. Commerce is not less redolent of an era in which the empire, built on trade and extended by arms, expanded beyond the empires of ancient as well as modern times. Moreover, it will forever be associated with the enterprise of an age of extraordinary economic growth, accompanied by the first clear signs of industrialization.

Associations of this kind conceal facile generalizations, oversimple conclusions, and dangerous misunderstandings. But the

¹ iii. 326.

terms themselves, rooted in the usage of the day, are none the less important. Understanding mid-eighteenth-century England involves deciphering the code in which it thought and wrote, rescuing its meaning from the contamination of modern usage, and testing its relevance against the hard historical evidence. Blackstone's phrase was not only meant to be descriptive: though it revealed what he believed the English to be, it also implied his own approval that they were so. Not least it associated his own age with the spirit of progress. His book was designed to explain the arcane mysteries of English law to an audience which had the intelligence and interest to grasp its principles, but was too busy serving the diverse requirements of a complex, developing society to put itself through the costly experience of a traditional legal education. Practically every learned and scientific specialism had its Blackstone in the middle of the eighteenth century, appealing to much the same readership. It was a readership which, these writers believed, would not have been available in an earlier, less enlightened age. In short, a polite and commercial people was peculiarly the accomplishment of Blackstone's own time, at least of his own century. What exactly did he mean by it?

Commerce did not merely signify trade. Rather it suggested a definitive stage in the progress of mankind, as evidenced in the leadership of western Europe, and the manifold social and cultural consequences thereof. The eighteenth century had many anthropologists, economists, and sociologists, though it did not call them by these names. Most of them agreed that they lived in a commercial age, an era in which the processes of production and exchange had dramatically increased the wealth, improved the living standards, and transformed the mores of western societies. They contrasted the results with the feudal conditions still to be found in much of Europe and with still more primitive societies discovered overseas. France, Holland, and Britain were the obvious leaders in this progress, but Britain, in particular, seemed to be in the very forefront, with its formidable intellectual inheritance, its admirable political institutions, its spectacular financial sophistication, its vast overseas empire, and its burgeoning industrial production.

Commerce not only expressed the peculiar modernity of the Hanoverian age, it also indicated the problems which preoccupied contemporaries and the uncertainties which clouded their con-

religion about the attempt to control it, public polemic about generating and regulating it, and social policy about confining it to those who did not produce it.

Luxury was the subject of endless controversy, not least when the object was to predict the future, one of the favourite objects of controversialists. Optimists saw no obvious limit to the enrichment of so vigorous a society, and endorsed the numerous improvements and changes which it brought to rural and urban life. They fearlessly replanned the education, supervision, and welfare of the lower class to fit it for such a society, assumed that British power would maintain the international competitiveness of this remorseless successful State, and made due allowance for the provision of godly discipline and pious benevolence in a commercial age. Pessimists worried about the economic nemesis which must befall a people unaware of the natural limits of expansion, doubted the demographic and commercial vigour of their own State, and deplored the transformations which economic change brought to traditional values, faiths, and customs. They denounced the corruption and hypocrisy which marred a once venerated political system, urged a reversion to fundamental religious values, and grimly looked forward to the collapse of what seemed in every sense a meretricious society. It was possible to entertain some of the confidence with some of the doubt, and few people took an extreme view on all of these questions. Complacency and despair were usually to be found in equal measure and often followed each other among the same people in rapid succession. But between them they embrace the most pervasive concerns of the age.

In a sense politeness was a logical consequence of commerce. A feudal society and an agrarian economy were associated with an elaborate code of honour designed to govern relations among the privileged few. Their inferiors could safely be left to languish in brutish ignorance under brutal laws. But a society in which the most vigorous and growing element was a commercial middle class, involved both in production and consumption, required a more sophisticated means of regulating manners. Politeness conveyed upper-class gentility, enlightenment, and sociability to a much wider élite whose only qualification was money, but who were glad to spend it on acquiring the status of gentleman. In theory politeness comprehended, even began with, morals, but in practice it was as much a question of material acquisitions and urbane

manners. It both permitted and controlled a relatively open competition for power, influence, jobs, wives, and markets. Though it involved much emulation and admiration of aristocrats, it did not imply an essentially aristocratic society. Britain in the eighteenth century was a plutocracy if it was anything, and even as a plutocracy one in which power was widely diffused, constantly contested, and ever adjusting to new incursions of wealth, often modest wealth.

Politeness and politics had the same stem and were certainly complementary terms in the eighteenth century. But there was a significant distinction. Politeness was primarily about the social control of the individual at a time of intense enthusiasm for individual rights and responsibilities. Politics, at every level, involved individuals in consciously making decisions which affected large numbers of people. Assessing the consequences needs a certain historical sensitivity to the personalities of those involved. It is possible to be reasonably confident that the sentimental vogue would have occurred in the 1760s and 1770s without the stimulus supplied by the writings of Rousseau. It is even feasible to suppose that infant mortality and prison conditions would have been exposed to critical investigation without the leadership provided by Hanway and Howard. But it is less easy to be sure that Canada was destined to join the British empire without the generalship of Wolfe, or the Stuarts condemned to stay at Rome without the statesmanship of Walpole.

Yet the underlying tendencies of public life were closely related to the themes displayed elsewhere. The traditions inherited from the seventeenth century revealed the vigour on which the British prided themselves, but not the discipline and order which they sought to acquire. Popular libertarianism, religious conflict, party strife, dynastic instability, all remained features of the decades which followed the Revolution of 1688. The competition and change so characteristic of the mid-eighteenth century might have been expected to make these contentions worse. They also put a still greater premium on regulating the consequent tensions, securing the highest possible degree of consensus, and generally averting the chronic divisions which had threatened the stability of post-Revolution in England. To this extent the politics of the period, though not always very urbane, were the politics of politeness, the pursuit of harmony within a propertied society. Nor was this a matter of the operation of unseen forces. Rhetoric aside, all the