

Factual – Measured – Critical

**‘My Toothbrush Isn’t Foaming’: The Changing Status of the Rural Upper Classes.
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The image of the British rural upper class prominent in contemporary fiction is that of the TV series *Downton Abbey* in which they live, quite literally, a world apart, removed even from the need to dress (or undress) themselves. This is a pervasive idea, indicated in the rural myth of a peer, staying away from his estate without his valet, perplexed as to why his toothbrush wasn’t foaming. He had always relied upon the valet to place toothpaste on it for him. So what’s changed since the period portrayed in *Downton*?

There is still a very rich rural upper class living a world apart. But changes in rurality (estate, activity and association) have occurred too. This article looks at some key changes and their impact on rural spaces now. It concludes by suggesting that the rural estate is under threat, but has also been renewed as a playground for a new class of super-rich different from the rural set portrayed in *Downton*.

In Britain, the Industrial Revolution produced a shift in wealth and power for both town and country (where a ‘parallel’ Agricultural Revolution also took place). Large country estates remained as important sources of wealth for the rural upper class, albeit now diversifying their interests. In County Durham, for example, Charles William Vane (3rd Marquess of Londonderry) became phenomenally rich from both his country estates and from coal mining.

The rural upper class elite was, by the nineteenth century, already international, with bases in London, in the country and also across-continent. Rural upper class families, such as the Vestey’s gained high social status, joining the Establishment in the twentieth century, by “‘buying’ a peerage with a political donation of £20 000” (Woods 2013:125).

Yet key challenges threatened this, with the loss of young men during WWI for landowning families and rises in death duties (from 8% to 50% in 1934 for properties over £1 million). A number of estates moved into joint-ownership arrangements with the new Ministry of Works and The National Trust and, simultaneously, new post-war land rights opened up previously entirely privately-managed areas of the countryside. By this time, the aesthetic or leisure activities of the countryside had themselves become valuable – as a kind of entertainment park in their own right – with rural elites seeking to monetise access (Longleat, for example, opened as a safari park in the 1960s – complete with its own resident lions).

This period began to concentrate landownership away from the gentry and towards a super-rich rural elite. In 1914, the gentry owned half the land in England but in the twenty-first century half of the British countryside, while remaining in private ownership, is primarily in the hands of a different type of owner. Indeed, Freeland (2012) argues that the super-rich are actually only those in the top 0.1% (rather than

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1%). Does this plutocracy include the British rural upper class? And does a rural estate still feature?

How power operates now has changed, it is not just about where natural resource is found, but who controls it. This is a significant shift from Lord Londonderry's coalfields in the north East of England. The leisure and cultural cachet of rural spaces has become just as important as their traditional agrarian wealth-production. So would the contemporary owner of a fictional *Downton* have given up their valet for a shotgun and/ or ghillie – to make more money, or for play?

One of the unforeseen consequences of the global recession is that buying a country estate is relatively cheap. Of course the new plutocratic owners don't live there full-time so there is a 'hollowing out' effect, as in super-prime areas of London and parts of the countryside dominated by second home ownership. But these owners of the British countryside - the rural super-rich - want to 'control the view', as well as own it, to have privacy and seclusion, and they will buy thousands of extra hectares to get it. There will be no need or obligation for these new owners to take any notice of the local way-of-life because the super-elites exist in an economic and social world apart.

There are different ways of seeing what these new rural upper classes do with rural spaces. A shooting estate can be a working estate or a trophy estate. Rural spaces have value as leisure *and* productive value (cultural cachet as well as farming). What I outline below are the range ways in which different elites might use rural space.

There are seven possible relationships of the rural upper classes to the everyday lives of those living there and the individual character of a locale (Halfacree 2006). For rural elites, their association with the rural may be purely commerce-based in relation to the characteristics of that locale. Alternatively some choose to live there and a third group do both. A fourth group inherit such spaces and have done for a long time (e.g. Sandringham which has been in royal hands since Tudor times). A fifth group has, metaphorically, commercial fingers in many pies with rural interests being only one of these and they tend not to live in the countryside (this group would include commercial consortia). A sixth group, intriguingly, only go to the countryside for leisure (shooting, hunting, skiing etc.) and the seventh category is a blend of groups 4,5 and 6 - those who may have inherited, but elect not to live there, pursuing their global business interests and only visiting rural resorts to network and play.

Drawing on this typology it is possible to see that most super-rich rural elite interests are actually removed from the countryside. Groups 5-7 are rural transients and are barely there. Does this matter?

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Whilst a lot of change and discussion about change in the countryside is taking place (new laws about wildlife, housing, hunting and even the new high speed rail link), and the extent of the transfer in landownership is unknown, two possibilities emerge. One concerns stewardship (with its echoes of paternalism) and the other commerce and transnational entrepreneurship. Sociologists in the past have been very critical of the former and, with the latter, comes an end to this deferential model. Whether this really leads to a new relationship between owner and estate other than one that is just about making money and displaying wealth and whether these new 'lords of the manor' will have expectations their tooth paste will be applied for them or not remains to be seen. For as long as rural land continues to be an investment, rural spaces will continue to attract the elite, however that elite is constituted.

References:

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