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SOCIAL ORIGINS OF OFFICERS IN THE INDIAN AND BRITISH HOME ARMY: 1758–1962

P. E. Razzell

THIS PAPER¹ may be viewed in two ways: firstly as an attempt to test certain sociological hypotheses and secondly as a contribution to the social history of Great Britain.

The sociological hypotheses are derived from work done by Professor M. Janowitz. They may be summarized by the following quotations:

From an historical and theoretical point of view, there was every reason to believe that the military would be heavily recruited from non-industrialized areas—from agricultural areas and small towns . . . most fundamental there has been an integral association between military institutions and rural society. But in the final analysis the link between rural social structures and military organization is based on the more central issue of career opportunities.²

The broadening of the social base of recruitment (in the nineteenth century) took place in all the European countries, although the rate varied to some extent from nation to nation.³

The aristocracy first gave way to the middle classes in the artillery and the technical services where specialized technical training was required. In the more honorific cavalry, with its natural link to feudal life, the upper social stratum concentrated its numbers in the face of military expansion.⁴

In England the professional military and its élite members were mainly recruited from the southern rural counties (for the period 1914–50).⁵

In order to test these hypotheses, I initially studied British officers in the Indian army.⁶

As can be seen from Table 1, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the large majority of Indian army officers came from the middle class. However, the remarkable thing about this table is the *increasing* proportion of aristocracy and landed gentry over time—the percentage trebled during our eighty year period. A further breakdown of the statistics suggest that the proportion of the landed upper classes had stabilized itself by the end of the period.

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ARMY OFFICERS

TABLE 1

Changing Status Group* of Indian Army Officers

Period Arrived	Aristocracy	Landed Gentry	Middle Class	Number
	%	%	%	
1758-1774	1½	6	92½	448
1775-1804	3	13½	83½	626
1805-1834	5	19	76	950
Total	4	14	82	2,024

* Status Groups are derived from Burke's *Peerage, Landed Gentry*, etc.; Middle Class is a residual category.

TABLE 2

Percentage of Officers in the Indian Army with a certain type of birthplace:
1758-1834

	Actual percentage	Number	Expected* percentage
Rural	55	(588)	80
Small town	8	(89)	3½
Medium town	5	(56)	3½
Large town	34	(376)	14
	100	(1,109)	100

Rural = 3,000 people or below. Small town = 3,000-10,000 people. Medium town = 10,000-25,000 people. Large town = above 25,000 people.

*Taken from the 1801 Census.

Table 2 clearly demonstrates the over-representation of urban areas, especially the large towns. If plotted over time, place of birth shows little apparent trend, but against the background of the industrial revolution and concomitant urbanization during the period, the trend appears as an increasing proportion of men from rural areas and fits in with the increase in recruitment from the landed upper classes. It should be noted that there is a slight overall majority of officers from rural areas.

Table 3 shows that a disproportionate number of officers came from London, Wales and Scotland. We also ought to include Southern Ireland, because much of its population was not allowed into British armies as officers because of their Roman Catholic religion. Further analysis shows that Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the N.W. of England supplied more than their share of landed upper classes—certainly all the

P. E. RAZZELL

Border Countries must have had large numbers of redundant 'gentlemen'. It is significant that the large towns and cities appearing in the study are invariably old and traditional ones, for example, Edinburgh rather than Glasgow, London rather than Birmingham or Manchester.

TABLE 3
Officers in the Indian Army by Region : 1758-1834

Country or Region	Actual percentage	No.	Expected* percentage
London	11½	(196)	6
Midlands	12	(170)	21½
S.E. England	13½	(188)	10
S.W. England	5	(70)	6½
N.W. England	4½	(58)	13½
S. Ireland	15	(214)	18½
Ulster	4½	(64)	9
Wales	6	(75)	3
Scotland	25	(353)	11
Total	100	(1,388)	100

*Taken from the 1801 Census.

It is the industrializing rather than the urban areas which are under-represented in the Indian army. At this point it is interesting to ask what factors are important in making certain regions and countries good recruiting areas. Is it religion, ecology or occupational alternatives? Professor Janowitz in his book indicated that there was a link between the conservative hierarchical religions and armies in the United States. My data indicate no such relationship for the Indian army. Scotland is largely over-represented, yet its established religion is Presbyterian, the most individualistic non-conformist religion of all.

TABLE 4
Status Group and Branch of Service of the Indian Army : 1758-1834

	Cavalry	Infantry	Artillery	Engineers	No.
	%	%	%	%	
Aristocracy	13	65	15	7	75
Landed Gentry	8	75	12	5	285
Middle Class	5	83	10	2	1,664
Total Group	6	81	10½	3	2,024

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ARMY OFFICERS

Also if we allow for the 50 per cent of Ulster's population who are non-recruitable Catholics, this province has the proportion expected of it, even though over half of its Protestant population is Presbyterian, which is not the established religion of Ulster.

As for ecology, Table No. 4 and related statistics are relevant.

From Table 4 it may be seen that, although there are more of the landed upper classes in the cavalry than one would expect, the same thing is even truer for the engineers and artillery (the infantry is the 'social outcast' of the service to some extent); there is little change in this pattern over time. Further analysis of data not produced here shows that, surprisingly, there are twice as many cavalry officers from London as from the average region, and virtually no engineering officers from the Midlands or the N.W. of England. Also there are more sons of merchants in the cavalry, and more sons of industrialists in the engineers than would be expected statistically. Similar to this finding is that urban areas are over-represented in the cavalry, while such areas are under-represented in the engineers. Thus we see none of 'the integral association between military institutions and rural life' or any 'natural link (of the cavalry) to feudal life'.

As for occupational alternatives, I looked for some sort of relationship between the agriculture of a region and the numbers of landed officers from it. In fact the regions were defined partly on the basis of

TABLE 5
Status Group and Rank in the Indian Army : 1758-1834

	Aristocracy	Landed Gentry	Middle Class	No.
Lieutenant and below	%	%	%	
Captain or Major	3½	13	82½	922
Lt.-Col. or Colonel	3½	10½	85	660
Maj.-General and above	3	22	74	305
	6	13	79	137
Total all Ranks	4	14	82	2,024

enclosure of land, i.e. the Midlands were a central belt running north-south of counties which contained a high proportion of land unenclosed at the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁷ The Midlands were under-represented in supplying the upper landed classes as officer recruits, whereas N.W. England⁸ is considerably over-represented. Though data are far too vague to draw any definite conclusions, it may be suggested that, as both areas contained industrial pockets, differences in agriculture are possibly one of the main causes of differences in

P. E. RAZZELL

the supply of landed recruits, i.e. the enclosing of land might have supplied new estates for increasing numbers of younger sons. This finding, taken in conjunction with the previous one about the under-representation of industrializing areas, leads us to agree with Professor Janowitz about the central importance of occupational alternatives.

Table 5 shows a slight association between rank in the army and social status, with the aristocracy in the very top ranks and the landed gentry in the upper-middle rank of colonel. However, when length of service is taken into account, it appears that the aristocracy serve for longer periods, the landed gentry for more medium periods, and the middle class for shorter periods. Rank correlates with few other variables—an exception being that sons of the military tend to occupy higher ranks. Overall the picture is one of little social bias in promotion to the top positions.

TABLE 6

Average (median) length of service in the Indian Army

Period	Years	No.
1758-1774	8	448
1775-1804	19	626
1805-1834	17	950
Total		2,024

It is clear from Table 6 that the average length of service doubled within our period. This points to the growth of professionalism within the army. The wide social base of recruitment and lack of social bias in promotion also support this interpretation. So too does the fact that, during the first few years of the period 1758-1764, there were a considerable number of foreigners recruited into the army—in fact 10½ per cent of the total; this slumped to 1½ per cent by the next decade and never increased beyond this minor proportion—this suggests the decline of a mercenary element. Also the sharp increase in self-recruitment within the military tends to support this view.

To sum up the findings about the Indian army: they do not support the sociological hypotheses and if anything tend to refute them. Is this an exception to a general rule? An examination of the British home army might throw a little further light on the problem.

A comparison of Table 7 with Table 1 shows some striking differences. The British home army was very much more aristocratic than the Indian army—a ratio of something like 10 to 1 during the relevant period, 1758-1834. Also there are many more landed gentry in the home army—a ratio of about 2½ to 1. It should be noted that in the

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ARMY OFFICERS

TABLE 7

Status Group of Officers in British Home Army

	Aristocracy	Landed Gentry	Middle Class	No.
	%	%	%	
1780*	24	16	60	100
1830	21	32	47	100
1875	18	32	50	100
1912	9	32	59	100
1930	5	6	89	100
1952	3	2	95	100

* Each date represents an army list, from which samples were taken.

home army during the first period, the aristocracy actually exceed the proportion of landed gentry; this never happens in the Indian army where the gentry always substantially exceed the proportion of aristocracy. On the other hand, an interesting similarity between the two tables is the influx of landed gentry during the period 1780-1830. The increase in proportion of landed gentry in the home army is even more significant if we take into account the increase in the size of the officer corps, which more than doubled between 1780 and 1830—there was a five-fold increase in the numbers of landed gentry entering the army during this period. This is an important finding and will be discussed later. There are other significant things about Table 7. Between 1830 and 1912 the landed gentry achieved a remarkable stability in supplying recruits to the army; however there was an extremely sharp drop in the percentage of landed gentry officers after the First World War. The

TABLE 8

Status Group of Major-Generals and Ranks above, in the Home Army

Date	Rank	Aristocracy	Landed Gentry	Middle Class	No.*
		%	%	%	
1830	Generals	70	8	22	13
	Major-Generals and above	57	32	11	50
1912	Generals	30	22	48	19
	Major-Generals and above	24	40	36	50
1930	Generals	25	25	50	16
	Major-Generals and above	14	26	60	50
1952	Generals	22	17	61	18
	Major-Generals and above	3	2	95	50

* Total number of all Generals; weighted sample of Major Generals and above.

P. E. RAZZELL

aristocracy, however, declined slowly throughout the period 1780–1952 although there is a fairly sharp drop in 1875, probably due to the abolition of the purchase system in 1871. The middle class occupy about one half of officer posts throughout the whole of the nineteenth century—a reflection of the relatively open class system.

The significance of Table 8 is seen when it is compared to Table 7. There are $2\frac{1}{2}$ times as many aristocrats in the ranks of Major-General and above as one would expect from the proportion of aristocrats in the whole corps for 1830, 1912 and 1930. This means that the aristocracy maintained their relative monopoly of top ranks, although they lost an absolute monopoly throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (note that the landed gentry were under-represented in the very top rank of General until 1930, when they were extremely over-represented: they were always well represented in the ranks of Major-General and above except in 1952: they certainly improved their position throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). The sharp slump in the proportion of landed gentry in the whole officer corps during 1914–30 is reflected in the slump of landed gentry in the ranks of Major-General and above during 1930–52. In fact the latter slump is even sharper than is shown in the figures, as none of the upper landed classes filled the rank of Major-General in 1952, but occupied the very highest positions (especially that of Field-Marshal). Most of the famous Generals in the Second World War were from the landed upper classes, for example, Montgomery (Irish landed gentry), Alexander (Irish aristocracy), Ironside (Scottish landed gentry). We see here a continuation of the tradition that the landed upper classes came from Border Countries and we cannot agree with Janowitz that ‘the professional military and its élite members were mainly recruited from the southern rural counties’.

TABLE 9

Officers in the Home Army of Rank Major-General and above with inherited aristocratic titles attached to their names

Year	%	Number*
1780	30	155
1810	27	390
1830	27	509
1852	19	344
1875	9	500
1912	9	190
1930	2	146
1952	1	130

* Total number of Major-Generals and above in any one year.

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ARMY OFFICERS

Table 9 shows what happened to the titled aristocracy in top ranks as opposed to the aristocracy as a whole (the latter includes members of cadet, i.e. branch families). Surprisingly there was a considerable drop in the proportion of titled Major-Generals and above during the period 1830-52—surprising because of the usual historical interpretation, i.e. that the broadening of the social base of the army was due to the introduction of examination requirements in 1849 and the abolition of the purchase system in 1871. However the puzzle as to how the aristocracy maintained their relative advantage in top positions in spite of the abolition of purchase and adoption of the principle of seniority is solved by looking at what happened to the total number of Major-Generals and ranks above. There was a very sharp contraction in the total number between 1875 and 1912: the main effect of abolition was to clear much of the lumber from the top although middle-class lumber rather than aristocratic. The sharp drop from 1912 to 1930 of aristocrats with inherited titles reinforces the idea that the lower aristocracy and landed gentry took over the top ranks during this period.

TABLE 10

Officers with Inherited titles in various Regiments and Branches of the Home Army

	1780	1810	1830	1852	1875	1912	1930	1952	1962
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1st Life Guards	0	4	15	24	34	42	} = 15	11	3
2nd „ „	17	15	21	24	27	21			
Royal Horse Guards	6	3	15	27	33	33	30	9	14
Grenadier Guards	15	17	13	20	23	23	—	—	—
Coldstream Guards	15	15	16	28	33	12	—	—	—
Scots Fusiliers	8	15	15	21	24	19	—	—	—
Artillery	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	$2\frac{1}{2}$	$1\frac{1}{2}$	1	$\frac{1}{2}$	—	—	—
Engineers	0	$1\frac{1}{2}$	1	1	1	0	—	—	—
Royal Marines	1	$\frac{1}{2}$	1	0	0	0	—	—	—
Total Army	$2\frac{1}{2}$	2	$2\frac{1}{2}$	2	$2\frac{1}{2}$	2	—	—	—

We see from Table 10 that all the Guards regiments became more 'exclusive' throughout the nineteenth century.

What was happening was that although the aristocracy was losing its monopoly of high rank, it maintained its social status by excluding outsiders from élite regiments i.e. the more power it lost, the more it attempted to maintain its status. This can be seen by looking at other branches of the army. Although the engineers, artillery and marines always had fewer aristocrats (an exception to this is the artillery in 1830), the proportion dropped throughout the nineteenth century.

At the beginning of the century the aristocrats were distributed more evenly throughout the whole army—usually in top positions in all regiments. By the end of the century they tended to crowd together in the regimental havens of social security. One of the most interesting features about Table 10 is the change that took place between 1875 and 1912: there was a sharp slump in the proportion of titled officers in the Coldstream Guards (from 33 per cent to 12 per cent), but a substantial increase in the 1st Life Guards—in fact, this regiment by 1912 was the most exclusive ever found at any time. It consisted of 70 per cent aristocracy, 18 per cent landed gentry and 12 per cent middle class. The First World War brought about a reorganization of the army and some regiments disappeared; of the rest only the Life Guards and Royal Horse Guards retained their exclusive character. Thus the First World War was also a watershed in regimental exclusiveness, although even today the Royal Horse Guards can muster 14 per cent titled aristocrats. It is easy to see the differences between the British home army and the Indian army with respect to regimental exclusiveness. There was virtually no exclusiveness in the Indian regiments and what little there was, was to be found in the engineers and artillery, as well as the cavalry. The home army was completely different: a small number of regiments were very exclusive, especially the cavalry—the engineers, artillery and marines were all shunned by the aristocracy.

Thus the home army accorded more with our sociological hypotheses, although there are exceptions here, for example, the relatively unchanging social composition of the home army during the nineteenth century. The value of such general hypotheses is questioned in the light of the complexities of our historical material.

I now turn to a discussion of the implications of the results for social history. First as implied, the sociological nature of the Indian army and home army officers was completely different. The reasons for this are probably not too difficult to find: the Indian army was the army of merchants (the East India Company) who would naturally tend towards bias against the aristocratic principle. Further, the aristocracy themselves were averse to service abroad especially in hot, humid climates. Cecil Woodham-Smith⁹ describes the evasion of overseas service by the home army social élite in the following way:

By going on half pay, or by exchanging at a price, into another regiment, wealthy officers avoided uncomfortable service abroad. When a fashionable regiment had to do a tour of duty in India, it was notorious that a different set of officers went out from those who had been on duty at St. James's Palace or the Brighton Pavilion. When the regiment returned, the Indian army officers dropped out and a smarter set took their place.

The aristocracy used the same techniques of going on half pay and

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ARMY OFFICERS

transferring into other regiments in order to win quick and easy promotion. They would buy the rank of captain (say) and a few months later transfer to half-pay (temporary retirement); then they would wait the required number of years before buying the post of major in a regiment where there was a vacancy (this of course was a check on regimental exclusiveness). It was in this manner that the Earl of Cardigan and the Earl of Lucan became generals, even though they had only spent eight years or so in full regimental service. The aristocracy at home did not earn their higher-ranking positions by longer service, as was the case in India. Woodham-Smith also describes the conflict which took place between the home army aristocratic élite and 'Indian' officers (officers who had seen service in India) during the Crimean War. The aristocracy viewed the 'Indian' officers with social contempt, whereas the latter were critical of the military capabilities of their aristocratic commanders. An example of the aristocratic approach is furnished by Lord Cardigan who in the Crimea refused to allow some of his horse lines to be moved to dry ground from a muddy patch where the animals stood knee-deep in mire, because it would spoil their symmetry.¹⁰ The 'Indian' officers fared very much better—they were very effective as troop and company commanders, especially of Turkish irregular units. The reasons for their superiority are perhaps their extensive experience of war in India, as well as the promotion for ability rather than for social status. The Duke of Wellington, although a fervent believer in an aristocratic army, served in India for some years before his rise to fame.

In both the British home army and the Indian army there was an influx of landed gentry at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth: during the same period there was a significant growth of religious seriousness amongst the landed upper classes and the reform of the Public Schools. T. W. Bamford has demonstrated the concentration of landed gentry in Rugby. He also quotes Anne Merivale thus: 'Rugby was flourishing in numbers and reputation and aristocrats tried, and tried in vain, to make him open its doors for the admission of pupils from the higher classes.' Apparently Thomas Arnold was aware of the 'barbarian' nature of the aristocracy and wished to set and keep the serious religious tone of his school, so that he might educate Christian Gentlemen. Bamford also writes 'that there has been a persistent story that Rugby's success was built on the influx of the sons of manufacturers', although his data do not support this notion. All this seems somehow mysterious. Perhaps the role of the landed gentry in the revolution of manners, morals and society at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, has been neglected. Analysis of the Indian army data showed that a considerable amount of 'social mixing' took place during the beginning of the nineteenth century: for example, we find a few landed

gentry whose fathers were merchants and even artisans during the late period, but not during the earlier times, though there were no aristocratic merchants; also over half of the landed gentry families (in the Indian army statistics) were new ones, whereas practically all the landed gentry in Scotland and the aristocracy everywhere were old families (surprising in view of the large number of Peerages created by George III). Possibly many old families faced the problem of how to place their increasing numbers of younger sons in suitable positions: evidence for this is to be found in the Indian army where during the earlier period a majority of officers were eldest sons, especially amongst the landed upper classes, whereas by the end of the period everyone is a younger son. There also appears to have been an influx of the middle class, especially merchants, into the landed gentry—perhaps those mysterious manufacturers' sons at Rugby? I believe that there was a fusion between the 'barbarian' gentry and 'philistine' middle class in the reformed public schools to produce the 'barbarian-philistine' Christian Gentleman, a hybrid whose personality has profoundly affected the English national character! Initially this transformation would be linked to the evangelical religious revival but later this would be diluted in the Public schools. The intellectual aristocracy described by Noel Annan¹² is derived from this upper-middle class. If this transformation occurred as described, the reasons for such changes were probably partly economic and demographic: a newly enriched merchant and capitalist class plus an over-populated gentry—over-populated enough to drive many a gentleman to the colonies and even India. The gentry were certainly transformed from local militia-men to officers in a standing army.

For the bourgeoisie, entry into the army must have been experienced as a considerable rise in social status: as an officer's pay at home had hardly changed from the end of the seventeenth century and the price of a commission was very expensive, (for example, the normal price of a cavalry lieutenant-colonelcy during the 1860's was £14,000),¹³ only the wealthy could afford a career in the army, and the wealthy at that time were usually from the landed upper classes. The army had been a great conservative force in British life. Thus the Duke of Wellington could say, 'It is promotion by purchase which brings into the Service . . . men who have some connection with the interests and fortunes of the country . . . It is this circumstance which exempts the British army from the character of being a "mercenary army"; it has rendered its employment for nearly a century and a half not only not inconsistent with the constitutional privileges of the country, but safe and beneficial . . . Three-fourths of the officers receive but little for their service besides the honour of serving the King.'¹⁴ This honour was sufficiently great to create a black market which dealt in commissions. Permission to purchase a commission was very hard to come by and there existed a

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ARMY OFFICERS

recognized auction room for dealings in commissions in Charles Street, London, where competition was often keen. Black market prices were roughly twice the officially stipulated prices. The Duke of York's mistress, Mrs. Clarke, created quite a scandal in 1807 when she was found to be involved in this black market. This system was successful unlike the French one described by Eleanor Barber¹⁵ where the bourgeoisie were excluded from the army, as well as from the civil service and church—she maintains that this exclusion from social status was a contributory factor in the French Revolution.¹⁶ In Britain the emphasis has always been on money, and the purchase system ensured that the British army was never closed to the wealthy middle classes—the Indian army allowed lesser lights to quench their thirst for social status.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of the study was the way the landed upper classes maintained their position within the army throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. The great watershed was of course the First World War. After this war members of the landed classes were remnants; although very important remnants. The exact reasons for the decline of the landed upper classes in the army at this time (1912–30) are rather difficult to find. Probably the elimination of estates through taxation and agricultural depression was one reason. Another might be the decline in status of the army as a career. Before 1914 a career in the army had been a leisurely avocation—plenty of sport, especially riding and hunting: truly an occupation for a gentleman. The nightmare of the First World War changed all this: the army had become a grim employer. Even so, the British army is far from being a democratically recruited one: figures published by the War Office¹⁷ show that 80 per cent of Sandhurst Commissions during the 1950's went to public school boys, in spite of the fact that only about 10 per cent of the relevant age-group goes to these schools. Certainly the great public schools lost their monopoly of Sandhurst commissions: in 1891, 55 well-known public schools and universities supplied the total of 373 cadets, whereas by 1961 roughly twice as many cadets came from nearly six times as many schools (308), widely spread over the country and differing greatly in their form, size and status.¹⁸ In fact the decline of the landed gentry coincided with the decline of the large, well-known public schools in the army. It is during this period (1891–1961) that education rather than land-ownership became decisive as the defining criteria of status groups. It is interesting to trace the decline of the landed upper classes—it is a structural process. The top status group, the aristocracy, goes first and is gradually replaced by the second, the landed gentry; it in turn is displaced by its own offspring, the public school graduate. Accompanying this downward decline is a drift to higher and higher positions by the remnants of the previously powerful status group, for example, the remnants of the

landed gentry were to be found in the rank of Field-Marshal by the 1950's. Perhaps we can expect the same thing to happen to the public school monopoly of top positions, but the sun has yet to set on the English Gentleman.

NOTES

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² Professor Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Political and Social Portrait*, p. 85.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁶ The source of this data is Major V. C. P. Hodson's 'List of the officers of the Bengal Army, 1758-1832'. As Major Hodson spent over 30 years compiling this biographical and genealogical list, the data may be considered to be very reliable.

⁷ Midlands as defined here included: Norfolk, Cambs., Hunts, Beds., Bucks, Oxon, Gloucs., Berks, Wilts, Warws., Northants, Leics., Rutland, Notts, Derbys, Lincs and Yorks.

⁸ N.W. England is the other non-geo-

graphical category; it included Herefordshire, Salop, Staffs, Worcs., Ches., Lancs, Westmorland, Durham, Cumberland, and Northumberland.

⁹ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Reason Why*.

¹⁰ Colonel H. De Watteville, *The British Soldier: His Daily Life from Tudor to Modern Times*, op. 198.

¹¹ T. W. Bamford, *British Journal of Sociology*, Sept. 1961.

¹² Noel Annan: see the chapter 'The Intellectual Aristocracy' in *Studies in Social History*, ed. by J. H. Plumb.

¹³ H. De Watteville, *The British Soldier . . .*, p. 177.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁵ E. Barber, 'The Bourgeoisie in 18th Century France'.

¹⁶ A Ph.D. thesis by John Blacker (in the Senate House Library, London University) throws some doubt on this analysis by Barber.

¹⁷ Quoted by Philip Abrams in S. Huntington (ed.), *Changing Patterns of Military Politics*.

¹⁸ Sir John Smyth, *Sandhurst*, p. 263.