



Book Review

Posh Boys: How the English Public Schools Ruin Britain by Robert Verkaik, Oneworld Publications, London, 2018, 400 pp, ISBN-13: 978-1786073839, price (h/b) £16.99, p/b £10.99

Reviewed by Nick Duffell

This book shocked me. I have been going on about the problems of the public schools and how boarding damages their pupils and their subsequent families for decades – but this book is something else. Verkaik is a lawyer and investigative journalist with a Fabian background who has written about Guantanamo Bay and Jihadi John. In *Posh Boys* he has amassed the evidence to show just how catastrophic the private education system is for our entire nation.

In general, we Britons imagine we have a so-called ‘Independent Sector’ of education that runs in parallel, like our health system, so that the wealthy can have ‘better’ options – or as the Boarding Schools Association proposes, to support ‘parental choice’. But Verkaik has looked into this carefully, and tells us that the UK has to ‘spend more on private education than any other country in the developed world’. Hang on, I thought they were supposed to be independent and private? Verkaik explains.

Our state schools are not charities, receive no fee payments and are subject to rates, whereas private schools are charities, get paid (about £40,000 per pupil per year for the top-drawer schools) and pay no rates. He calculates that in the five years from 2017 Eton will save an estimated £4.1 million. All the schools

combined should pay £1.16 billion in business rates, but as charities they will pay just £634.26m. And it gets worse. They are also exempt from corporation tax and most types of investment income tax, so all profits from public schools are tax-free. If this were not the case and VAT were charged on school fees, the country would gain around £1.5 billion annually.

Just in case you are a bit like me and tend to blur over when figures are mentioned, I will put this in another way. Verkaik is arguing that the UK taxpayer is actually *subsidizing* the production of little Borises, Camerons and Rees-Moggs. OMG! What if this fact were known by disgruntled northern Brexiteers!

Removing public subsidy, he suggests, private education might start to become more like a luxury brand, encouraging a significant proportion of parents to choose the state sector. And there have been various attempts over the years, from Clement Atlee onwards, to dismantle this system, but it has proven to be robustly supported by financial interests, and all parliamentary initiatives have been torpedoed at the last minute by various ex-public-school politicians or civil servants.

My own experience is of having been asked to consult with veteran Labour MP Barry Sheerman about a decade ago whether the psychological claims I was making could support the Charity Commission's re-examination of the issue. However, this initiative ended being side-lined due to the MPs' expenses scandal.

More recently, a group of professionals, including Susie Orbach and others, followed up the journalist Alex Renton's exposé of sexual abuse in public schools by signing a joint letter to *The Observer* newspaper proposing the removal of charity status from private schools. I had the task of networking this amongst educationalists, and ran up against the problem that for the most part, 'alternative' schools, like Montessori and Steiner schools, receive no per pupil payment from government (as they do elsewhere in Europe). In the end they dared not support it, because of the financial risk it posed them.

Verkaik penetrates the extraordinary tiers of hierarchy of our privileged schools for the privileged, topped by Eton, Harrow, Winchester and St Pauls, showing how they are untouchable by governments of whatever colour because they are protected by a mighty lobby of interests welded into the British Establishment. About 1,000 schools have charity status, bound by the 2006 Charities Act, stipulating that trustees 'have a responsibility to ensure that they are running the school for the public benefit'. However, in 2011, he reports, the Independent Schools Council won a court ruling that determined that it was 'up to the trustees and not the Charity Commission to determine how this is achieved'. Going back a century, Verkaik lists endless attempts to reform that eventually come to nothing.

Anachronistic as this all sounds, the public schools remain the gateway to social success for aspirational families who can spare the necessary £40,000 (Verkaik mentions Wayne and Coleen Rooney, Paul Weller and other heroes of popular culture who end up buying in), as well as the *nouveaux riches* from India, Russia and China and, of course, the Gulf. Worse, in 2016, according to Verkaik, the *Daily Telegraph* revealed how some foreign families had been encouraged to make donations to advance the acceptance of their

offspring. A secret filming of the registrar at Stowe in conversation with a Russian businessman, keen to turn his son into a gentleman, elicits the useful information that a six or seven figure sum 'would be helpful when there was a "marginal decision" over when a pupil should be admitted'.

In case you feel inclined to think the word 'corrupt', simply read on. Verkaik informs us how the public schools are now leading the way for British educational excellence on a global scale. Dulwich College, for one, has a thriving franchise system with currently six outlets spread over China, South Korea and Singapore. At the same time, Verkaik cheekily includes the fact that Dulwich's most famous old-boy, Nigel Farage, friend of Donald Trump, roundly denounced some *Times*' journalists, who had investigated his MEP's expenses claims, as 'establishment figures by naming the public schools they attended'. No wonder Brexit is seen as a good thing: the stodgy Europeans all invest in boring state schools!

At the same time, the public schools mostly plead poverty, encouraging enormous donations from ex-alumni. Verkaik, who reports that Eton received £4.6 million from the National Lottery fund for a sports complex in 1995, also points to the 2016 American Friends of Eton College Gala Dinner, which raised \$200,000 auctioning – amongst other prizes – a lunch with Old Etonian Damian Lewis, star of the award-winning TV thriller *Homeland*. Another shock for me here, since I had sent Lewis a copy of *Wounded Leaders* in December 2014 after hearing 'Desert Island Discs' presenter Kirsty Young ask him this brilliant question: 'Who were you at boarding school?'

Lewis replied:

Going away at eight is a sphincter-tightening exercise. An eight-year-old is asked to deal with a new situation that I think can be overwhelming. Some swim, some sink. It definitely informs who you become later.... Eton really is a high-octane privileged entitled environment... a massively competitive environment... that feeds this idea that you better not be the one that's caught out, because if you're the one that's caught out you'll be turned on, so it feeds this readiness to be quick-witted, nimble, agile of mind at all times, which

of course is its own defence mechanism and is there by the time you leave....

Hmm... Lewis seems to have been in a different gear at that point.

Now and then, the public schools have had various schemes with governments to accept pupils from poorer backgrounds, and some have various bursaries; Verkaik cites a £2 million bursary fund for aspiring golfers at Winchester. Mostly, it feels like they are an elaborate public relations initiative to promote the feel-good factor and prevent governments having to dig deep and really get to grips with education. A recent *Spiegel Geschichte* supplement on the British Empire commented that in Britain we seem to like to do everything on the cheap.

A recent 'resource effective' initiative for 'independent' boarding schools to take a quota of less privileged children relied on relevant social workers to make recommendations and placements. In this case, not a single social worker put one single child forward to have their attachments broken for the sake of a privileged education. Verkaik seems not to have come across this, and I only found it because former *Self & Society* editor David Murphy wrote to me in late 2017 from Nottingham University, which had been put in charge of investigating why the scheme had come to nothing. Those social workers I know try amazingly hard to keep children in their families. And here, of course we get on to the subject of the mental-health issues connected to what I now call 'privileged abandonment' and which I, alongside Professor Joy Schaverien and others, have been flagging for decades. The other principal authorities on the national problems of private education, Melissa Benn and David Kynaston, who

have both very recently published important surveys, fail to include this perspective.

Happily and importantly, Verkaik's penultimate chapter 'The Entitlement Complex' leans very heavily on our work and brings in this missing aspect, I was delighted to read, and it leads directly to his concluding chapter, 'The Dissolution of the Public Schools'. Whether this aim can ever be achieved, especially given the current unpopularity of a social-justice agenda, is hard to say. However, as I write, we are a week away from an initial meeting of a parliamentary group convened by the Fabian society which will be addressed by Kynaston, Benn and Verkaik; myself and others who understand the psychological issues will be there, too.

In the mean time, I can heartily recommend Verkaik's book as a shocking page-turner, replete with essential information which is otherwise pretty well ignored in Britain. It may even have relevance in understanding our next Prime Minister, while, nationally, we continue to overlook the critical conclusions of Verkaik's brave investigation – even if they are right under our noses.

About the contributor

Nick Duffell is a psychotherapy trainer and author of *The Making of Them* (2000) and *Wounded Leaders* (2014); and he co-authored *Sex, Love and the Dangers of Intimacy* (2002), *Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege* (2016), and *The Simpol Solution* (2017). As a psycho-historian, he promotes a depth-psychology perspective of on issues that affect our public life, such as identity and emotions, fear and vulnerability. Nick has contributed to *Self & Society* journal for many years.