

The dogged persistence of the British 'old boy': how private school alumni reach the elite



The mythical figure of the public-school 'Old Boy' has long had a hold on the British cultural imagination. But, as [Aaron Reeves](#) and [Sam Friedman](#) explain, alumni of elite schools continue to enjoy very real advantages in reaching the elite.

Of the fifty-four Prime Ministers elected to office in Great Britain, a staggering thirty-six (67%) were educated at one of just nine elite schools. This small group of 'Clarendon Schools' – consecrated as the 'Great Schools' by the government-initiated Clarendon Commission in 1861 – carry a remarkable historical legacy for incubating future leaders. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they were widely considered 'the chief nurseries' of the British elite, defining institutions that prepared alumni to take up positions of power across politics, law, media, culture, and the military.

Today, the distinct characteristics of these schools – classical academic curricula, distinct extra-curricular activities, and a boarding school structure – remain largely unchanged and their alumni continue to exert a profound influence. For instance, the two key politicians on either side of the "Brexit" debate – David Cameron and Boris Johnson – both attended the most prestigious Clarendon school, Eton College.

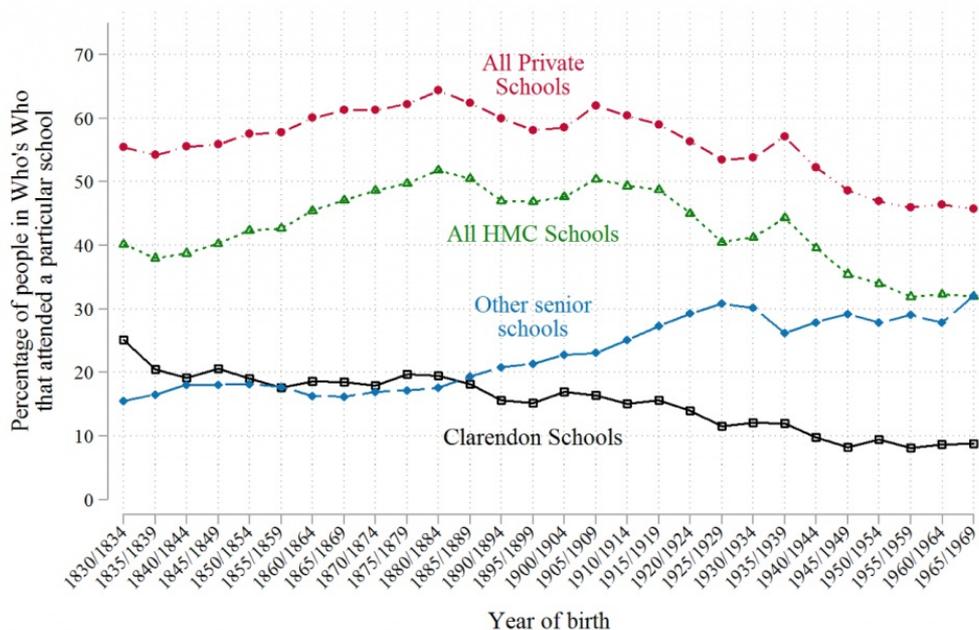
Yet although these schools continue to confer advantage, the degree to which they are able to propel their "old boys" into elite destinations, and how this has changed over time, is largely unknown. The kind of data needed to answer this kind of question simply has not been available in Britain.

The extraordinary dataset we draw on in a recent [paper](#) – 120 years of biographical data contained within [Who's Who](#), an unrivalled catalogue of the British elite – therefore provides a unique opportunity. Specifically, it allows us to explore, for the first time, the changing relationship between Britain's elite schools and recruitment to the most powerful elite positions in British society.

We argue that *Who's Who* represents a useful measure of the elite because, unlike definitions such as the 1% or the super-rich, it incorporates those whose power and influence is not always or only economic. Primarily it documents a positional elite; 50% of entrants are included automatically upon reaching a prominent occupational position. For example, MPs, Judges and FTSE100 CEOs are all included by virtue of their office. The rest are selected by a board of long-standing advisors based on a noteworthy professional appointment or sustained prestige, influence or fame. While this process is somewhat shadowy and has its limitations, crucially it is not influenced by politicking and entries cannot be purchased.

If we look at the educational origins of those in *Who's Who* – looking at people born in particular years, e.g., 1840-1844 – then we see a striking pattern. In Figure 1 we plot the proportion of entrants in each birth cohort who report attending Clarendon, HMC (private schools in the prestigious Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference), private (all independent schools), or all other schools (reported schools not included elsewhere). There is a clear downward trend over this period in the proportion of *Who's Who* entrants who have attended a Clarendon school. Among those born in the 1840s, approximately 20% had attended one of these nine schools, whereas the figure has dropped to 8% among the most recent birth cohort.

Figure 1: *Who's Who* Entrants by School Type, 1830 to 1969 Cohorts



But this tells us little about the *relative* advantage enjoyed by 'old boys'. To examine this, we compared Clarendon alumni to everyone else born in the same birth cohort. Among people born between 1845 and 1849, for example, someone attending a Clarendon school was approximately 274 times more likely to end up in *Who's Who* than someone born in the same year who did not attend one of these nine schools. If we move forward to our last cohort (those born between 1965 and 1969), we see a significant decline: someone born in 1967 who attended a Clarendon school is approximately 67 times more likely to end up in *Who's Who*.

What might explain this substantial decline? Changes in occupational structure may have played a role. For example, both military and religious elites had well-established and long-standing connections with Clarendon schools and so the decline of the British Empire combined with the secularization of British society may have reduced the proportion of Clarendon school alumni, simply because fewer 'old boys' could utilize this route into the elite.

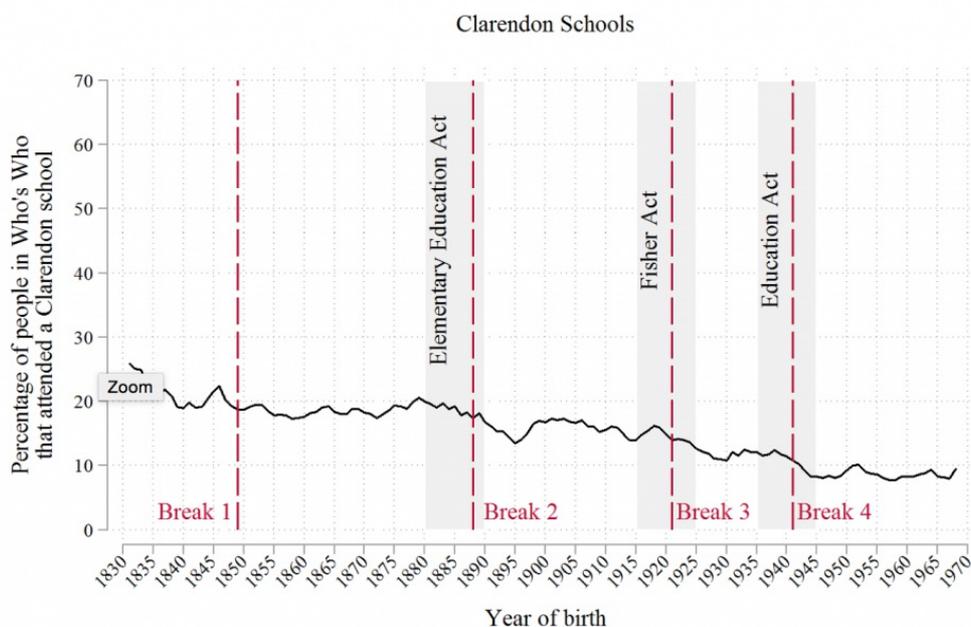
Another possible explanation is the number of women included in *Who's Who*. During this period, the Clarendon schools remained male-only and so increases in the number of female in *Who's Who* may thus reflect an important increase in the competition faced by Clarendon alumni.

Both changes to the occupation structure and the shifting role of women in British society seem to play some role in the decline of the Clarendon schools. But, as our paper details, their impact seems to have been quite modest.

Another potential driver may be the combined effect of Britain's educational reforms. Over the past 140 years, the structure of the British education system has shifted significantly from a voluntary system combining fees and charitable institutions to a compulsory system that is largely state-funded with a small fee-paying sector. This transition began in earnest with the 1890 Elementary Education Act, which reduced fees for state elementary schools, and was extended under the Fisher Act of 1918 and then the Education Act of 1944, which raised the compulsory school leaving age to 15 (later 16) and abolished all fees. These reforms, combined with changes that standardised credentials across schools, may have hampered the ability of 'old boys' to trade off the name of their school in the same way as they may have in the past.

To examine this hypothesis we look at whether the cohorts born before these reforms experience a greater likelihood of being included in *Who's Who* than those born after their implementation. Figure 2 shows our results for the Clarendon schools. The shaded areas represent those cohorts affected by the introduction of the reforms and the vertical red lines detail the estimated structural breaks we observe in the power of Clarendon schools (see full paper for more on methodology). Significantly, we see clear declines in the propulsive power of the Clarendon schools occurring right after the introduction of the 1890 Elementary Education Act, the Fisher Act of 1918, and the Education Act of 1944.

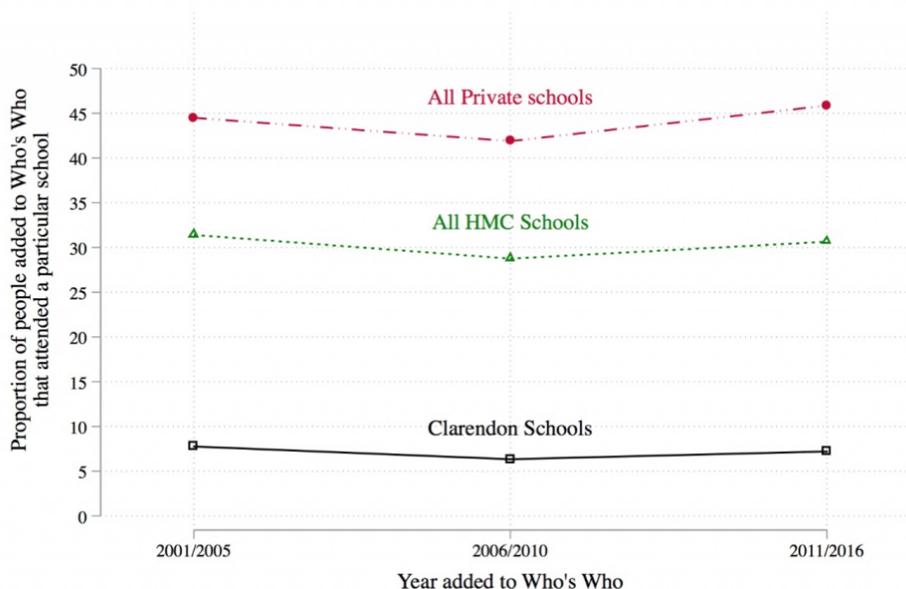
Figure 2: Did the power of the Clarendon schools decline following periods of educational reform?



So far our results point toward a significant decline in the reproductive power of Britain's elite schools over time, and a concomitant opening up in terms of the composition of the British elite. Yet it is important to stress that this decline must be viewed in a wider context of persistence rather than cessation. Even at their lowest ebb, nine small Clarendon schools (representing less than 1 in every 500 pupils) still produced nearly 1 in 10 of all *Who's Who* entrants.

The persistence story is further supported by Figure 3, which examines the educational background of individuals added to *Who's Who* since 2001. It shows that, over the past 16 years, the proportion of new entrants from these elite schools has remained relatively constant. The decline in the reproductive power of elite schools, then, has largely stalled.

Figure 3: The Persistence of Old Boys in Who's Who, 2001 to 2016.



Finally, it is important to contextualize the profound relative advantage *still* enjoyed by Clarendon 'old boys'. Within the current edition of *Who's Who* – which naturally combines a range of birth cohorts – 9% of entrants attended a Clarendon school, and 32% attended one of the other HMC schools. This remains a large, even gross, overrepresentation; Clarendon alumni are 94 times more likely to be a member of the British elite. Even alumni of the other HMC schools – our weaker definition of elite schooling – are 35 times more likely to be a member of *Who's Who*.

What this illustrates, we think, is that the power of elite schools clearly lies beyond simple academic excellence. These schools do not just prime 'old boys' to achieve credentials; they also likely endow them with a particular way of being in the world that signals elite male status to others. This may no longer resemble the antiquated embodied style of the British Gentleman. But, as [others](#) have suggested, may manifest in broader (yet similarly gendered) dispositions of self-presentational polish that have currency across a range of settings.

This polish is enacted in particular ways of speaking and dressing but also in more diffuse "ways of knowing"; it is "not what you learn in classes but how you know it," as elite education scholar Shamus Khan has [argued](#). And these schools continue to nurture valuable extracurricular interests, particularly in terms of sport, cultural participation, and taste. Of course these dispositions and practices do not necessarily guarantee entrance to the elite, but they may be key ingredients in understanding the continuing, dogged persistence of the British 'old boy'.

Note: This draws on a co-authored [article](#), published in the *American Sociological Review*. An open access version of the paper is also available [here](#).

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