RALPH SNEYD: TORY COUNTRY GENTLEMAN[1]

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I

RALPH SNEYD (1793–1870) came of an "old respected family" that had long been in possession of the family mansion of Keele Hall in Staffordshire, and had long stood in the forefront of county society.[2] His father, Walter Sneyd, as member of parliament and Lieutenant-Colonel of the Staffs. Militia, kept the family honours bright, but the son brought little lustre to them. He failed of election to parliament and he bungled the local Conservative organization; his sole public office was that of High Sheriff of the county in 1844. In 1829 he succeeded to large family estates where—so far as the world might judge—he lived and died "an obtuse, quiet, respectable country gentleman" to be remembered by his descendants only "as forming a link in the chain of a long pedigree".[3]

Although Sneyd moved much in country-house society, in the company of persons whose letters and journals have been published, they tell us little about him. Charles Greville merely noted his presence at fashionable gatherings in the great houses. Sydney Smith remarked that he spent a day with Sneyd at St. Cloud;[4] and although Sneyd hit off the Whig parson most accurately "as something between Cato and Punch",[5] Smith had nothing to say about his companion.

[1] The correspondence of Ralph Sneyd used for this article forms part of the Raymond Richards collection of Sneyd Muniments deposited in the John Rylands Library and made available by him to scholars.

[2] R. W. Jeffery (ed.), *Dyott's Diary 1781–1845* (London, 1907), *passim*.

[3] Sneyd MSS., Agar Ellis to R. Sneyd, 13 November 1826. Agar Ellis warned Sneyd in this letter that, talented as he was, he was destined to obscurity; and Agar Ellis reproached him for his indolence.

[4] Nowell C. Smith, *The Letters of Sydney Smith*, i (Oxford, 1953), 442, Sydney Smith to his wife, 29 April 1826.

[5] Hon. F. Leveson Gower (ed.), *Letters of Harriet Countess Granville*, (London, 1894), 384, Lady Granville to Lady Carlisle, May 1826.

Miss Edgeworth met him at Trentham and found " young Mr. Sneyd of Kiel (*sic*)—very fashionable ".[1] Trentham, the Italian palace of the Leveson Gowers, was not far from Keele, and Sneyd made it a second home. One of its family, Lady Harriet Granville, knew him well, and her letters disclose more about Sneyd than do other published sources.

One side of Sneyd they make plain enough—that of the raconteur who was both wit and mime, and a constant delight to his audience. That there was another side to the man is merely hinted at: " Mr Sneyd," Lady Harriet wrote in 1825, " has a mind that reaches all subjects and understands all thoughts."[2] More of Sneyd *au seriéux* Lady Harriet never revealed. Fortunately, some little while ago, a large number of Sneyd's own letters came to hand, and are now housed in the John Rylands Library. The correspondence of few Englishmen in the nineteenth century—and who did not write letters endlessly in that patient age?—provide such enjoyable reading. What is more they cast light on that side of Sneyd that Lady Harriet merely indicated. Some mysteries remain, but the new letters warrant this sketch of Ralph Sneyd.

What is to be learned from scanning the uneventful life of so obscure a country gentleman? Nothing of momentous consequence, to be sure. But Sneyd was no mediocrity: there was richness and vigour in his thought, and knowing him may help one to remember—what is in danger of being forgotten—that aristocracy bred individuality, that the ranks of England's landed gentlemen held all manner of persons, and that there are many pitfalls for historians who lean heavily on the general attributes of social classes. Also Sneyd was a Tory. And it may be instructive to savour his brand of Toryism, and to appreciate how little it deserves Bagehot's jibe at country gentlemen: those " grand files of speechless men (who) have always represented the land of England ".[3]

[1] F. V. Barry (ed.), *Maria Edgeworth ; Chosen Letters* (Boston and New York, 1931), p. 205, Miss Egdeworth to Mrs. Ruxton, 20 January 1819.

[2] Leveson Gower, *Letters of Countess Granville*, i. 366, Lady Granville to Lady Carlisle, November 1825.

[3] Mrs. Russell Barington (ed.), *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot*, iv (London, 1915), 142.

II

In 1827, after an unsuccessful contest for a seat in parliament, Sneyd declared himself thoroughly indifferent to the course of England's politics. Neither the removal of Lord Liverpool—whose worth he appreciated as few people did—nor the choice of a new Prime Minister revived his interest.[1] But Liverpool's death began an era of catastrophe for the Tory party. From 1827 to 1830 it fell to pieces. Canning's death—" the extinction of that great light "[2] as Sneyd put it—followed close on Liverpool's; Huskisson, whom Sneyd also esteemed highly met his tragic end;[3] and finally Wellington and his ministers resigned. This series of misfortunes proved sufficient to stir Sneyd out of his apathy. He was now of a mind that none but a government led by the Duke could keep the gates closed against the flood of revolution.[4]

The prolonged crisis of the Reform Bill filled Sneyd with horror, for his Tory philosophy convinced him that he faced the beginning of the end, the first stages of an inevitable dissolution of society. It had never before occurred to him to fear for his property; but now he looked upon his lands at Keele and wondered how much longer he would be permitted to enjoy them. " *Here* we are in daily expectation ", he wrote in May 1831, " of all the Colliers and all the Potters, who are governed by the ' Central Union ' at Manchester turning out—and if they do—we are entirely at their mercy."[5] There entered his mind even the terrible thought of going into exile abroad, where property and person would be safe.[6] And although he suppressed this idea, he still felt it wise to stop work on a variety of projects " founded upon the notion that I should pass the latter part of my life upon my property, and in the enjoyment of the means which my forefathers possess'd".[7]

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 27 February 1827.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 23 December 1828 (?).
[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Agar Ellis, 23 September 1830.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 30 November 1830.
[5] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Agar Ellis, 17 May 1831.
[6] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Agar Ellis, 5 May 1831.
[7] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, October 1832 ('33 ?). In this quotation as elsewhere I have translated some of Sneyd's shorthand; e.g. " sh^{d} " into " should".

It happened, however, that no *jacquerie* expelled him from his estates before or after the passing of the Reform Bill, and Sneyd soon resorted again to his private and engrossing pleasure of landscaping Keele. This may have helped to ease the pangs of political defeat, although the great world of public policy still seemed shrouded in darkness and " the worst [still] seemed an inevitable certainty ".[1] Then, at the end of 1834, with King William's dismissal of his Whig ministers, even the face of politics changed for the better. Sneyd now began to hope that, if the old constitution could not be restored, at least something of its spirit could be kept alive. The new order of things was not pleasant, but it might be " yet possible to make it fit for a gentleman to live under ".[2] In spite of his indolent and fastidious nature, he was enough moved to take up the arduous and grubby business of local party politics. Lady Harriet Granville reported that " Mr. Sneyd is busy organizing Conservative measures in Staffordshire ";[3] and General Dyott, an old friend of his father, noted approvingly in his journal that young Sneyd had come forward as President of the new Conservative Association in the county,[4] and was busying himself calling upon the local nobility " to make a show of the power we possess ".[5]

Such zeal, however, lasted little more than a year. In 1837 General Dyott made the melancholy entry in his diary that the Association's finances were thoroughly muddled and its electoral machinery out of joint—" owing to want of energy and attention in President Sneyd than to any other cause ".[6] Sneyd had once more concluded that the game of politics was not worth the candle, and that creating an " effect in a landscape " was as worthy an occupation as winning an election. " I do not feel that my baubles are emptier, my toys more childish."[7]

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 26 March 1835.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Leveson Gower, *Letters of Countess Granville*, ii. 186, Lady Granville to the Duke of Devonshire, 13 April 1835.

[4] Jeffery, *Dyott's Diary*, ii. 196.

[5] Ibid. ii. 238.

[6] Ibid. ii. 255.

[7] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 5 July 1839.

He never saw fit to change his mind again. Comically enough, in 1844, he became for the year that curious personage High Sheriff of the county, a dubious honour that he presumably could not escape. The account of his distress is best left to Sneyd's eloquent pen.

Where, in the black catalogue of human ills, Philosophers place the office of Sheriff, I am not exactly cognizant—probably in the same class with Bankruptcy and Mental distraction, to which it appears pretty directly to lead. . . . How should you like to live at a lodging in the dirty town of Stafford for a week in March—and a week in July—and a week in Midwinter—and to give foul feeds at an Inn to Justices & Grand Jurors—and to do 500 things w^h^ will equally disgust me. . . . In this absurd country where no abuse is ever reformed, it will cost me about £1200. . . . Now I'll trouble you, Mr. Queen's Remembrancer [his friend, Vincent], or any other authority of the Court of Exchequer to tell me on what class of her subjects your gracious Mistress has the power to inflict (against their will and without consent of Parliament) so heavy a Mulct. Talk of Ship Money indeed! Why was there no shrieval Hampden to blow his trumpet and hurl his javelins ag^st^ such Tyranny? Then I must always be *within reach* in case of an Election (which thank God is not likely), or a requisition for a County Meeting, which any fools are competent to sign.[1]

III

And so after a brief excursion into county politics and a short period of hopefulness about the state of the nation, Sneyd withdrew forever from public life. Earlier in the twenties, in a more cheerful time, he had declared himself but a spectator; and plainly his character was such as to induce him to seek retirement under any circumstances. With all his chaff and wit, he was also melancholy; perhaps a failure in love had helped make him so. And the hurly burly of a public career—what Jane Austen once called "the efforts of civility and the noise of numbers"[2]—clearly bored and fatigued him; he sometimes found it too much to dine with his tenants at Keele.[3] But in addition to these things, Sneyd's withdrawal expressed the distaste of a man who found the age in which he lived repulsive to his tastes and principles.

Early Victorian England was the home of earnest and practical men: solicitors, engineers, merchants, manufacturers, administrators, economists and reformers. Evangelical piety often

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 26 February 1844. [2] *Emma*, ch. 35.
[3] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 22 October 1859.

went hand in hand with practical intelligence, and a sense of being ever in the eye of the Lord often prompted a mastery of things, the better to serve the Master of all men. This cast of mind is usually and rightly associated with names like Wilberforce and Thornton, Stephen and Macaulay, with the counting house and the professions. But it was also communicated to that other England, of meadow and stream, of parsonage and country house, where by 1840 it had gained an ascendancy—although in not quite the same form taken elsewhere. Still there was much in common : a fundamental seriousness that nurtured responsibility and self-discipline, and a zest for the labours of the intellect as well as for those of private and public affairs.[1]

It perhaps needs to be said that not every landed gentleman exhibited these traits in the forties and fifties ; for social classes behave with less uniformity than some students of society would care to admit. The Corinthian world of the Regency and George IV was never completely extinguished even in the middle decades of the century. Lord Huntingtower, the seventh Earl of Cardigan, young Mr. Windham of Felbrigg—to pick some names at random—all flourished in these years. But in more ways than one they belonged to a kind of aristocratic underworld : raffish and Hogarthian enough, yet less inclined than ever to expose itself to the bright light of day. After all, William Crockford, the notorious gambling-house keeper, retired from business in 1840. And almost simultaneously the Queen and her beloved Albert established a new order in the life of the Court. Fresh winds were blowing in upper-class society, and they blew most powerfully in the decades of the forties and fifties.

Singular transformations thus often occurred in the leadership of landed families, as sons proved themselves very different from their fathers. Consider, for example, Lord Chandos who salvaged a remnant of the family estates from the ruin that his father, the Duke of Buckingham, had brought upon them. He was scarcely more than a youth, but he had learned vital religion at his mother's knee, and it served him well. Few noblemen in the nineteenth century had to face so distressing and humiliating

[1] See G. M. Young, *Early Victorian England*, ii (London, 1936), 413–17.

a predicament. Surrounded though he was by clamorous creditors and clever solicitors, plunged in a morass of legal and financial complexity, he persevered, saving what could be saved and winning himself a reputation for good sense and businesslike capacities. Admittedly this was not the precise pattern of affairs throughout the landed society in these years. Not every father was a Duke of Buckingham, and not every son a Chandos. But there was much that was representative in the story of this family, especially where it touches upon the life of the younger man, who was serious, responsible and informed, a man of prayer and a man of business.[1]

Sneyd, however, was not an evangelical, although he was in his own way a Christian and an Anglican. One gathers that religion for him was pretty straightforward, a matter of decency and good sense. He loathed Regency rakes like Alvanley and Sefton, and himself avoided dragging the family name in the mire.[2] It was his duty to attend church, in order that the villagers be afforded a good example.[3] It was also his duty to provide for the fittings and fabric of the parish church, although it was not his duty to admire unreservedly the beauties of Victorian stained glass.[4] There was not a trace in Sneyd of that deep conviction of human depravity, and its consequence, that relentless moral self-examination of the evangelical mind.[5] Nor was beauty for him touched by evil. In short, Sneyd's Christianity was latitudinarian, and tending to scepticism ; it bore the flavour of the Augustan age.

Declining to cultivate enthusiasm in religion, Sneyd tended to avoid it elsewhere—at least wherever his contemporaries were given to it. He rebelled instinctively against the sort of earnestness that made much of the notion of improvement, secretly sure that man's existence was precarious and his real betterment

[1] Stowe MSS., in the possession of the Huntington Library, California, *passim*.

[2] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 31 October 1832.

[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, undated, probably in 1820s ; Sneyd writes : "I must now go to Evening Church—as I shirked in the morning—or the village will think its Seigneur a heathen."

[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Rev. Walter Sneyd, 2 May 1870.

[5] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 8 January 1863.

unlikely. This was a way of looking at society and the universe that was suited to the aristocratic and still rural world of the eighteenth century, not to the age of coal and iron and bustling reform. And indeed Sneyd would have been far more comfortable with Burke and Gibbon than he was with John Stuart Mill and Thomas Babington Macaulay. What he valued most in the world—and about which he could be serious—was Augustan urbanity and all that it meant in the way of wit, elegance and beauty. On reading the correspondence of Madame du Deffand, Sneyd remarked that "I feel to know all that society as if I had lived in it" ; [1] and on the death of Lord Holland in 1840 he genuinely mourned the passing of the old aristocracy : " I do not believe that there ever existed a *Machinery* so perfect for the Extraction of the largest amount and highest quality of social enjoyment." [2] With Holland House gone there was not much left but the supreme dullness of Victoria's court. When his Staffordshire neighbour, Lord Granville, was to stay with the queen at Coburg for a month, Sneyd gasped : " Think of the 30 evenings !!! Obscurity has its compensations." [3]

Sneyd's reading showed the style of the man. He once told Henry Vincent that in his youth he had had a keen appetite for metaphysics, that he had spent many an hour with the works of Dugald Stewart and Bishop Berkeley.[4] This taste passed away, but his favourite authors, one suspects, belonged to the eighteenth century, or at any rate, shared the Augustan outlook and style. He took small pleasure in Macaulay who was neither a gentleman nor a judicious historian.[5] He found German thinkers sheer "mystification", and Carlyle equally unintelligible. Was there, he asked, any English translation of Carlyle ?[6] In short, Sneyd preferred the hard lucid prose of the eighteenth century ; he disliked " rhapsodising " ; and he refused to bow down to the idols of materialism which Macaulay and so many of his contemporaries worshipped.

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 7 December 1859.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 9 November 1840.
[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 6 August 1863.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 16 February 1863.
[5] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 1 September 1857.
[6] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 27 November 1850.

Sneyd, one may be sure, failed to find the same pleasure that many landed gentlemen found in reading the solemn, utilitarian articles of the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*. For Sneyd nature was not a kind of machine capable of an ever growing efficiency and productivity, if only its secrets were searched for and rightly read. It was not in him to feel that curiosity about the natural world that was so widespread among Englishmen of the early nineteenth century and that often took the shape in those innocent times of an insatiable appetite for measuring things—almost anything, it would seem, so long as it was measurable. Lord Althorp of the Reform Bill liked nothing better than calculating to four decimal places the degrees of particular cross breedings among his beloved cows.[1] And Earl Fitzwilliam was wont in the spring to measure daily the growth of flowering buds. Or, what is perhaps a greater oddity to our eyes, he insisted on putting friends and dependents on the scales, recording their height and weight, as if this information would somehow prove valuable in the future and reveal some attribute of nature of which men had been unaware.[2]

Landlords like Fitzwilliam and Philip Pusey, Althorp and Sir James Graham, were enthusiasts for the gospel of high farming. In the 1820's Althorp had gone to the length of setting up a laboratory in his rooms in the Albany to acquaint himself with the new science of agricultural chemistry.[3] Sneyd, one suspects, knew next to nothing about the science of farming, and at bottom agreed with the poet, Coleridge, that agriculture ought not to be looked on merely as a kind of industry.[4] His mind was engaged, not by schemes for draining and by plans for cattle yards,[5] which matters he left entirely to his agent, but by the natural beauty of the countryside and by the art of adding to that beauty through human contrivance, skill, and taste. He was as pleased to find, as he eventually did, that good farming

[1] Althorp MSS., in the possession of Earl Spencer, Althorp Park, Northamptonshire.

[2] Milton MSS., in the possession of the Northamptonshire Record Society.

[3] Althorp MSS.

[4] Professor Shedd (ed.), *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vi (New York, 1860), 215.

[5] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 12 August 1844.

had improved his landscape as that it had lengthened his rent roll.[1]

It happened therefore that Sneyd was not long in possession of the family estates before he began his "chief amusement", the working out of his picture of Keele—the creation of a "place" and a "house".[2] He started with the place: in 1830 he was planting cedars of Lebanon, "marching and countermarching detachments of hollies—platooning yews—& like Caesar covering my bald places with laurel".[3] In the following year he was excavating: "sinking one pool to the level of another . . . the twelve labours of Hercules were mere child's play".[4] And in 1832 he was staking out an orchard; "besides their blossom and their beauty, there is an association of English rural home and comfort about an orchard (to say nothing of the *word*) which gives me infinite pleasure and satisfaction."[5] Charles Grenville protested that if all reports were true Sneyd "must have planted over the whole county of Stafford". Sneyd replied that he was working to a plan; having begun with the grounds he was now approaching the "outworks"—lodges, stables and farm buildings—and eventually he would reach the "citadel", the house.[6]

He was to be a long time in reaching the house. Well before he got there, however, he had acquired a nicer discrimination in architecture than many of his contemporaries, who were as perfunctory in their architectural taste as Mr. Rushworth in *Mansfield Park*.[7] The age of Victoria was not a time of distinguished country-house building: Thoresby, Mentmore, Belvoir and Peckforton are not names fondly recalled by Englishmen when they review their heritage of domestic architecture. Instead it was a time when country gentlemen had their minds filled with the stables, cottages, and homesteads that would serve the needs of an efficient agriculture. If they thought about the style of their houses, they were often inclined not to make enough distinction

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 10 October 1860.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 11 January 1855.
[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Agar Ellis, 18 April 1830.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 16 August 1831.
[5] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 10 March 1832.
[6] Ibid. R. Sneyd to Agar Ellis, 8 March 1832.
[7] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ch. 6.

between what was comfortable and massive, and what was beautiful, as when some judged Woburn, the seat of the Duke of Bedford, an example of architectural beauty.[1]

Sneyd was not taken in by Woburn's grandeur. Neither art nor nature had made it, but merely size and lavish furnishings. It was no accident that a duke without taste and a duchess with bad taste were its owners.[2] But in Sneyd's opinion, there were far worse houses : Eaton in Cheshire belonging to the Marquess of Westminster and Alton Towers in Shropshire belonging to the Earl of Shrewsbury being perhaps the most offensive ; " monsters which tasteless wealth spawns on the face of the land ".[3] The Earl's was an "unintelligible house, bedizened in a masquerade dress of antiquity indicating total want of eye and feeling and an equal ignorance of the immense resources of Castle Gothic ".[4] Eaton " was a private residence in the disguise of a Cathedral ", thus defying " sense, taste and convenience ".[5] The Marquess who inherited Eaton some decades after its building asked Sneyd what could be done to remove its deformities. He was told either to leave it alone or demolish it ; half measures would not answer.[6]

It was not sufficient, however, for a house to satisfy the canons of " sense, taste and convenience ". Kedleston, for example, was correct and intelligible enough, "a sort of black-stone syllogism. . . which one cannot reason down because it is all demonstrably right ". But it bored Sneyd : " one can only yawn and cross one self ".[7] Obviously he looked for something more than correct proportions ; and at houses like Hardwick and Wrest he found it. Hardwick he always visited from Chatsworth as a guest of the Duke of Devonshire, and on returning invariably discovered that Chatsworth with all its splendour seemed " comparatively mean ".[8] And Wrest, among those great houses which he knew, he found to be " facile princeps ". Admittedly its style was bizarre but this was redeemed " by a

[1] T. Martin, *The Life of His Royal Highness, The Prince Consort*, i (New York, 1875), 102.

[2] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 6 November 1856.

[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 18 October 1842.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, November 1862.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 15 November 1853.

[8] Ibid.

certain grandiosity. . . by noble associations—being the architectural type of the aristocracy of France in its brilliant and luxurious days ".[1] Bess of Hardwick's great Derbyshire mansion doubtless fired his imagination in the same fashion, by calling up an heroic age in England's history when aristocracy and beauty had it all their own way.

Wrest and Hardwick, the Canalettos of Woburn, the place and house at Keele—to such things Sneyd gave the fire of his energies and the close attention of his mind. Here he was confident, excited and enthused. But the humdrum business of estate management made a very different world in which he was indolent and childlike. Yet his estate was large and its concerns exceedingly complex. Keele was 9,000 acres in size, lying cheek by jowl with the Potteries. Below the soil there was an abundance of coal and ironstone; on it stood blast furnaces as well as the more conventional enterprise of a farming community. As railways and towns pressed upon Keele, the uses to which its land could be put became even more diverse; and the demands put upon the businesslike capacities of its owner became accordingly more severe.

In the main Sneyd's generation of landed gentlemen met the challenge of the industrial age. In doing so, not all made themselves familiar with new agricultural techniques or acquired the expert knowledge of the mechanic, as did Lord Chandos. But a large number learned the simple lessons of prudence and economy. To have a reasonably accurate notion of how one got one's money and how one spent it, to pay bills regularly, to examine accounts, and to hire responsible and proficient agents, these became almost universally heeded axioms of English estate management in the nineteeth century. Landlords who ignored such fundamental principles became markedly fewer as the century wore on. Ralph Sneyd, however, did his best to remain as long as possible in their select company.

He inevitably cut a curious and amusing figure. There is a glimpse to be caught of him in the company of his fellow ironmaster, Lord Granville, solemnly discussing the price of pig iron, mourning over the losses incurred when landed gentlemen

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 6 November 1856.

made it, and puzzling about the mysteries of the iron trade.[1] One can be sure that he avoided getting to the bottom of it all. He preferred to leave his business affairs wholly to an agent's discretion, rarely pressing him for information, relying implicitly on his honesty.[2] For some years it seemed as if no great harm was done, although there was a rapid accumulation of debt on the estate such as Sneyd's father had not known. But on the death of the chief agent in 1848, Sneyd's eyes were rudely opened to the frauds and depredations of his servant. Thereafter, for at least a year, " the Augean stable of his affairs " demanded the whole of his attention.[3] He groaned aloud to his friend Vincent at the hateful necessity of spending his mornings in the company of solicitors. But what probably pained him more was the unavoidable suspension of " his occupation of making a place " at Keele.[4]

IV

Having gone this far in exploring Sneyd's mind and character, the shape of his ideas about society and politics is already visible. He was a Tory, but being averse to most Victorian things his Toryism is not to be confused with the Conservatism of Sir Robert Peel, still less with that of the *Saturday Review*. Sneyd stood much closer to Burke than to the great Prime Minister or to Fitzjames Stephen. Being deeply rooted in the simplicities of rural life and the sentimental associations of a traditional and hierarchical community, his view of the state and society had much of instinct in it. Not that he eschewed the intellect; but he found some of its uses suspect.

Like the older Tory Sneyd preferred that society in which men behaved traditionally, content to defer to lords and kings, untroubled by visions of material and social self-betterment. For Sneyd, as for Burke, the good society was not given to restless self-examination; the less it said about itself the better. Yet the time came when silence was broken, when the enemy at

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to Agar Ellis, 7 December 1829.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, undated, probably 1848.
[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 21 January 1849; 22 February 1848.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 4 November 1848.

the gate proclaimed a strange and repulsive creed, and Tories like Burke or Sneyd reluctantly took to explaining themselves and their view of the world. Such an exercise was distasteful; and to have recourse to it was in itself an alarming sign, indicating that the age of chivalry had given way to the age of sophisters and economists, and high principle had been swept aside by cool calculation. Yet, in self-defence, there was nothing for it but to join the discussion of fundamentals in society and politics.

So Sneyd resolved during the crisis over the first Reform Bill. What appalled him most in the argument of the reformers was the bland statement that the ultimate sanction of politics lay in the will of the people. For him as for Burke, "government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, . . . not inclination";[1] and the plain truth of it was that the people were wanting in "reason and judgment". Sneyd was a compassionate landlord who took pains to make comfortable the life of his estate labourers. But this was a far different thing from giving them a voice in the nation's government, and striving to make them over into constant and intelligent readers of the *Edinburgh Review*.[2] A growing newspaper press asserting the sovereignty of public opinion; and Whig ministers genuflecting before the popular will; how remote this all was in Sneyd's opinion from the sanity of normal times when parliaments consulted the interests of the people, not their wishes.[3]

No one was surer than Sneyd that parliament's work had been well done. To his mind the chief function of government was to keep society together in peace and to maintain the traditional liberties of Englishmen. That such liberties could be enlarged by extending the franchise was far from apparent to him; for he found no necessary connection between democracy and liberty.[4] As Sneyd saw it, if the Reform Bill passed, not liberty would

[1] Edmund Burke, *Speech to the Electors of Bristol.*

[2] The Tory Wilberforce feared in the 1820s that the *Edinburgh* would become reading matter for agricultural labourers; see R. I. Wilberforce and S. Wilberforce *The Life of William Wilberforce*, v (London, 1839), 47.

[3] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 25 April 1831; R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 5 May 1831 (?).

[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 12 May 1831; R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 30 November 1830.

triumph but equality. Political life would be reduced to the dead level of counting heads; the well worn Constitution of King, Lords and Commons would fall to pieces; and, perhaps most sinister of all, the new age of equality would demand that each man's wealth be not too unlike his neighbour's. The more popular the politics of a nation, Sneyd hinted, the more preoccupied it would be with material things.[1]

Such was Sneyd's prophecy—indeed the Tory prophecy—in 1831-2; and Sneyd lived long enough to have the mournful pleasure of knowing that Tories had been better prophets than Whigs. By the fifties he saw the advent of much that he had feared. With the revival of the question of the franchise, England was making ready to "descend another rung in the ladder of which the foot is in the Slough of American Democracy";[2] and party politicians like Lord John Russell—"our little bilious Constitution-monger",[3] as Sneyd called him—were showing the way.[4] By preserving something of the old variety in the franchise, the Reform Bill of 1832 had at least taken its stand on the principle of a representation of interests rather than on that of a delegation of men.[5] But now this valuable principle was being challenged by reformers who sought to introduce a uniform franchise in the counties. "The infinite varieties of franchise opposed a formidable difficulty to 'Reform bills', but an universal £10 is changed into £5 by a scratch of the pen—nothing so simple." [6] The road was thereby opened "to further popular aggression".

In addition the tripartite Constitution of Crown, Lords, and Commons *had* been dangerously undermined. The Commons had grown more powerful at the expense of both the Lords and the Crown. The ennobling of a mere historian like Macaulay pointed to the falling away of the Lords. "*Property, family* & great *public services* are the fundamental elements of the H. of

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to Lady Bute, 6 June 1831.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, March 1857.
[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 14 March 1854.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 10 April 1859.
[5] Coleridge refers to this distinction in his *Table Talk*; see *Complete Works of S. T. Coleridge*. vi, 352.
[6] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 13 March (?) 1859.

L.'s ",[1] Sneyd argued; but Macaulay had been elevated to it for his literary work,[2] thus tending to convert the House of Lords into Louis Philippe's Chamber of Peers—"into which all the Litterateurs & Journalists of the day were pitchforked "[3]—and rendering it less able than formerly to act as a separate and autonomous estate of the realm, as a check on the lower house.

The powers of the Crown had been similarly diminished. As early as 1840 Sneyd declared that the recent political revolution "has subjected Royalty to . . . hard conditions—[and] by these it must abide ".[4] Sneyd's Toryism had prompted him to revere even George IV, his faults and weaknesses notwithstanding; and he was still in 1840 anxious that the queen be "respected and upheld ", and that she be not opposed by Conservatives "upon the principle of a Whig opposition ".[5] At the same time the young queen must not be misled as to her true position. Momentarily the balance of parties in parliament created an illusion of royal power, and Victoria must not be "flattered into the notion that she may play Queen Elizabeth; she will be laughed at & put down ".[6] The constitution of George III was dead, "cut down from a *tempered*—but a *real* Monarchy—to a Republic—which is only not an unmitigated democracy from the still preponderant influence of our *traditions* upon the National Mind ".[7]

Finally, democracy was making ready to attack distinctions of rank and property, finding these most conspicuously situated in the aristocratic society of the land. "The Landowner ", Sneyd wrote in 1859, "is universally treated by Reformers, either openly or by inference, as a public enemy—a standing abuse—a remnant of feudal oppression whose political existence is an insult and a wrong to 'the People' and should be trampled out, cashiered and swamped."[8] If each kind of wealth was to have a share in government, as Sneyd maintained, then the political influence of the nobility and gentry was legitimate.

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 1 September 1857.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 11 January 1860.
[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 1 September 1857.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 30 March 1840.
[5] Ibid. [6] Ibid. [7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 13 March (?) 1859.

For land was wealth, in England a great source of wealth. Nor ought its owners to be abused, Sneyd added bitterly, merely because they formed a class "whose superior education & refinement & traditional influence provoke the envy of the Masses".[1]

But, as Sneyd was strongly persuaded, the abortive reform bills of the fifties sought to nullify the power of the landed interest in the government of the country; and Mr. Locke King's £10 franchise for the counties was intended simply to transfer the county representation from the landowner to the small tradesman.[2] Furthermore what Locke King did in politics Mr. Gladstone did in finance. As a maker of budgets Gladstone belonged to the Manchester school of finance: "His fixed idea is the absolute substitution of Direct for indirect taxation";[3] and his use of the income tax which pressed less severely on merchant and manufacturer would prove, Sneyd was sure, an effective engine of war for democracy. Sneyd admitted to Gladstone's gifts.[4] But early in the day he hit on him as a leader of the democracy, and like his master, Peel, no friend of the landed interest: "the same origin & the same illness doth attend on it—in the shape of a suspicious jealousy of his betters however much his inferiors. . . . I believe him nothing loath to do the worst."[5]

Sneyd did not live to see the worst, even as he might construe it. But he saw rightly, in the last decade of his life, that the age of the "Landed Ascendancy" was at an end.[6] New forms of wealth—urban, commercial and manufacturing—had come to hold a preponderance in English life, and Sneyd took little joy in the sight. In this he was different from many landed gentlemen who were exhilarated by the spectacle of urban trade and manufacture. They had quickly got over their alarm at the coming of the railway, discovering that the new means of transport was useful to the economy of the landed estate. Their mines

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 13 March (?) 1859.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 3 March 1859.
[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 27 February 1860.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 25 April 1851.
[5] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 14 March 1854.
[6] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 13 March (?) 1859.

benefitted and so did their farming. And when towns grew and trade flourished, when a new age was signalized by the Crystal Palace Exhibition, not a few landed gentlemen were full of pride and enthusiasm. It was not uncommon in every corner of agricultural England for landowners to send their dependants up to London to stare at Paxton's glass house and its wonderful contents.

But for Sneyd such things were as dust and ashes in his mouth. "Those devices of the devil",[1] he called the railways. "That foul smithy" was his form of address for that Newcastle which lay close to his estate—"black & dismal & filthy enough to be a first-rate Manufacturing Town".[2] Nor did London give him much pleasure. The noise appalled him: "I cannot close my eyes in noise! I really dread it. Under any circumstances London is repugnant to me".[3] As for the Crystal Palace Exhibition, Sneyd curtly dismissed it: "That great unwieldy plaything of Prince Albert's."[4] For all he knew it might benefit trade but what had it to do with landed gentlemen? "By all means let Trade have it—and Trade is quite rich enough to pay for it—but to go begging to the Land which it has just succeeded in half-ruining to pay the piper for its dance is rather too bad."[5] Unfortunately, as Sneyd knew too well, there was no getting away from the unpleasant fact that the Land and its traditional society were ultimately fated to pay the piper for the dance of Trade.

V

Yet with all his fatalism Sneyd carried on. However clearly his intellect saw that his society and class were declining, his instincts led him to make the best of it, to make do in the midst of a world that he had learned to detest. Thus outwardly it appeared that the master of Keele was no different from a good Whig nobleman like Earl Fitzwilliam whose philosophy was more in tune with the chief tendencies of the age. To have

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 18 October 1842.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 26 May 1836.
[3] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 24 May 1863.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, February 1850. [5] Ibid.

looked at Keele in the last twenty years of Sneyd's life, one might well have taken its owner for an optimist, a believer in progress, a staunch improver, a prudent businessman. The estate presented a bustling, prosperous scene. There was a stir of activity as resourceful tenants went in for the new husbandry, and the face of the land bore the marks of skilful cultivation. And up at the big house, the squire was once more at his planting and building.

Sneyd emerged from the crisis in his financial affairs with flying colours. However much he distrusted his abilities as a man of business, however great his distaste for practical affairs, he managed to do the right things. He consolidated his debts at a lower rate of interest by borrowing a large sum of money (£130,000) from the Equitable Assurance. He hired the services of a professional auditor from Birmingham who periodically inspected the accounts of the estate. He gave up the vocation of ironmaster by leasing the works and thereby freeing himself from an unpleasant and unprofitable responsibility. And, what was probably most important, he employed a new agent, Andrew Thompson, a Scot, who came of a large farming family, had several brothers who were themselves land agents, and had himself been in the employ of Charles Arbuthnot, the old Tory officeholder who owned a small estate in Northamptonshire. Arbuthnot regretted seeing Thompson go ; but had no wish to stand in his way. His merits were such that he deserved rather to " be agent to some one of great landed property than to remain with me ".[1]

Andrew Thompson was indeed a prize. He was one of that great line of Victorian land agents who were skilled in every department of their versatile profession, proud, responsible, intelligent men, who sought nothing better than to serve their masters well by serving the land of England well. By the sixties Thompson had made Keele into a model estate worked by good tenants according to the most advanced principles and methods.[2] He took upon his own shoulders the responsibility

[1] Sneyd MSS., C. Arbuthnot to R. Sneyd, 23 June 1848.

[2] See Evershed, " Staffordshire Agriculture ", *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 1869.

for decisions about the coal mines and about the sale of building land—matters which Sneyd found distasteful.[1] Few things, however, were more important for the finances of Keele. The income from Sneyd's mines rose steadily, and the increase in the value of land for building was equally substantial. Thompson showed himself an astute man of business, and Keele's affairs prospered in the last decade of Sneyd's life as they had never prospered since the day he succeeded his father.[2]

With all this Sneyd had little to do, beyond making sure that his agents were competent and trustworthy. Once done it was not long before the great passion of his life claimed him again. In January 1855 he announced to Henry Vincent that " to build is an unavoidable necessity. . . . I have now so developed the *Place*, that a *House*, more in correspondence with it, has become a positive want in my picture. I have for 24 years made it my chief amusement to work out this picture, & to leave it incomplete in so essential an item is flatly impossible."[3] Sneyd at once brought in the architect Salvin, and he and Vincent were soon busy discussing the merits of Salvin's plans. The architect had put in a " heavy squat tower " in the wrong place; Sneyd altered its position and raised it fifteen feet. Salvin objected to the dismemberment of some of his arches but Sneyd insisted and got his way, thinking all the time that Salvin was sound but needed watching.[4] There was no end of fascination for Sneyd in the watching, as the old Elizabethan mansion was re-built in red sandstone, enriched and enlarged, but following the general outlines of the original house. It helped a good deal, one suspects, to make Sneyd forget how much better off his ancestor and namesake had been. The age of Elizabeth had known no Reform Bills, no Mr. Gladstone, no Crystal Palace Exhibition.

Thus, as he brooded over the state of England, Sneyd went on with his planting and his building, as his ancestors had done for centuries before him. The landed interest might be close

[1] Sneyd MSS., A. Thompson to R. Sneyd, 10 December 1858.
[2] By the seventies the estate income had more than doubled over that of 1829.
[3] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 11 January 1855.
[4] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 15 January 1855.

to death, but the Sneyds and Keele prospered and flourished, and the pride of family was still very much alive. Sneyd, the bachelor, sighed with disappointment when his brother's wife gave birth to a girl: "Vanity of vanities it may be—but one does not willingly foresee the extinction of one's race."[1] So long as the sentiment of family was strong, landed gentlemen would take a deal of killing. As Sneyd once said: "one repeats some pregnant passage of Burke—& sighs—& grumbles—but does one's duty".[2]

[1] Sneyd MSS., R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 8 January 1863.
[2] Ibid. R. Sneyd to H. Vincent, 26 March 1835.