Book Review

Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion: A Psychohistory (2nd Edition)

Nick Duffell

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Reviewer: Nicholas Houghton

This isn't an easy book review. Like somebody who comes to therapy with all their defences up, Duffell appears to have anticipated any criticism and then explained it away. It is not an academic text, thus to treat it as such would be unfair. Nor is it a personal memoir, therefore don't criticise it as such. It's a hybrid, a new kind of book which is critic-proof. Moreover, the British middle-class are obsessed with pedantry. Implication: don't pull me up for factual errors. In addition, Duffell hates the British tradition of using words to bully someone. Implication: if he's on the wrong end of a bad review, the reviewer is a bully. Instead of tiptoeing around the author's sensitivities, I've decided to ignore them.

Duffell is a psychotherapist who came to prominence in 2000 with the pioneering book *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*, about the long-lasting psychological harm caused to children sent away to board. This book is in some ways a sequel, where Duffell not only describes the damage inflicted on children by boarding, but also its pernicious effects on the UK in general. However, notice the way the title of his latest book generalises away

from boarding schools to a more universal British attitude towards children: the author is fond of sweeping statements.

In the book's 367 pages, Duffell puts forward his theory that British boarding schools produce people who, on the one hand, have learned to repress their emotions and yet, on the other, have supreme self-confidence and a sense of entitlement. These are the 'wounded leaders' of the title, such as recent UK prime ministers Tony Blair and David Cameron. I'm no apologist for either of them, but correlation isn't the same as causation. Did Blair really make the decision to go to war with Iraq because of his experience as a boarder? Perhaps he had other reasons to want to suck up to President Bush. However, in this as in so much else, Duffell is in no doubt. The past and present of the UK is one of forever being messed around by politicians who are ex-boarders.

On occasion his analysis is right on the button. He points out that one of the problems UK politicians had with the European Union was an unwillingness to compromise and be part of a communal project; he is surely right when he claims that the British couldn't countenance playing any role other than leader. But again, I'm not convinced this can be blamed on boarding schools: the Prime Minister who most displayed this trait was Margaret Thatcher, who attended a day school. I would also suggest that the notion that some British people display of being superior to foreigners has a lot to do with the history of the Empire, and the potent myth of the UK winning the Second World War all alone and against all odds. Of

course, the notion of superiority shows up in the cultures of many other countries, with the USA and China being two striking examples.

In the same vein, Duffell blames some of the worst incidents from UK history on boarding schools, such as slavery. Let's set aside for a moment the very different attitudes to child raising and childhood in the eighteenth century, and consider that the UK shares the shame of being slave traders with other European countries which don't have the tradition of boarding schools. If boarding schools brought about the slave trade in the UK, what caused the French to participate?

Duffell tells us that he sometimes lives in France, which he portrays as somehow being the opposite of Britain; altogether different and hence better. I kept wondering, when he's there, does he notice the culture? Because if he did, he'd find so many of the assertions he makes in this book to be false. The problem with the British, he claims, is that their elite all come from the same narrow background. Well, what about the French, where their elite comes from an even narrower background: the École Nationale d'Administration? According to Duffell, another problem with the British is what he calls 'The Rational Man Project'. If there's one country which suffers from a surfeit of rationality, then it is surely France. Duffell makes the absurd claim that French society, unlike British, is 'maternally orientated' and this is in large part due to the influence of Roman Catholic iconography of the Madonna and Child. Casting aside the long tradition of anti-clericalism in all classes of French society, the extent to which the Roman Catholic Church did have an influence was surely as a vehicle for patrimony. Furthermore the French, without a

strong tradition of boarding schools, also built an empire based on the concept of white supremacy and, as noted above, also participated in the slave trade. All the accusations Duffell levels against Britain's military and political leaders for the madness of the First World War could equally be leveled against the French. Meanwhile the French are no less adept than the British at verbal bullying, and Duffell's assertion that the British exported games to the rest of the world rather overlooks the contributions of Frenchmen such as the Baron de Coubertin and Jules Rimet.

Time and again he makes assertions which are just wrong. I started noting them down and after about a hundred pages I stopped, because a review can only point out so many. It was as if, having worked out what is wrong with Britain, he was going to prove right his pet theory right, come what may. Therefore, we learn that the brains of boarders are different from those who did not board, but are provided with no evidence. His assertion that Germany doesn't have a class system would mystify any sociologist who knows the country, while his account of the European Enlightenment doesn't pass muster as philosophy or history. Being a historian involves a hard slog in the archives, not taking pithy quotes from authors who agree with you. He's read widely, but the reading appears unanalytical, haphazard and misses out key texts.

An irony which I kept thinking about is how strongly this book fits into a British tradition of anti-intellectualism. As a result, the level at which it is written (unlike its politics) is very similar to that of a newspaper the author would detest, such as

the *Daily Mail*. Duffell won't allow facts to get in the way of his rants, which can veer off in all directions; at one point he suddenly attacks American business leaders, leaving me wondering what that has to do with ex-boarders?

Like the *Daily Mail*, this text reads as an angry book: angry with ex-boarders; angry with politicians; angry with Britain; angry with men, and angry with the European Enlightenment for splitting people off from their emotions. It might be unfair to speculate about the source of the author's anger and whether it comes from his childhood. He tells us he was sent to boarding school and discloses a lot more about himself. However, he never reveals what I really wanted to know: how come he didn't turn out like all the other ex-boarders he describes?

I agree with the thrust of Duffell's world outlook, including his detestation of boarding schools. My argument is not with him as a person, or his opinions: it's with the book, which I have a duty to evaluate. In the final analysis, having a single theory which explains so many of this country's ills makes Duffell guilty of the same tramlines thinking he finds so abhorrent in 'The Rational Man Project'. Jung claimed that we are always in danger of becoming the thing we oppose most. This book reads like the bluster of someone who has learned that the best form of defence is attack: exactly like the wounded leaders he loathes so much.