

***Stiff Upper Lip: Secrets, crimes and schooling of a ruling class* by Alex Renton. Pp.398 (Hbk). London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson (2017). ISBN 978 1 4746 0054 5**

I grew up on a post-war council estate in Leeds and there was never the remotest prospect of my being sent to a boarding school. But I was always fascinated – a fascination of horror – by life in boarding schools which I read about in children’s fiction: *Malory Towers*, *Billy Bunter*, *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and curled up with the relief that I wasn’t there. This book is about the children and young people who *do* go to independent boarding schools, the wealthy and privileged whose parents pay up to £30,000 a year to be separated from them. They are a subset of the seven per cent of children who benefit from ‘private’ education with its small class sizes and often sumptuous resources.

Alex Renton attended a high-status prep school, Ashdown House and later Eton College. He writes of being dropped off at the prep school aged eight in his stiffly-pressed short trousers, long woollen socks and snake-buckle belt, feeling utterly miserable and bereft. He goes on to relate his experiences of the bullying and beatings that flawed his education and his life as a growing boy. While he writes movingly of his experiences, the book is about much more. Renton is a journalist who published an article about boarding schools in *The Observer* and invited people to write to him of their boarding-school experiences. From this he gathered a database of hundreds of accounts of the misery of boarding school life. They range from the simple homesickness of the youngest children to vicious and humiliating punishment beatings and lashings carried out by teachers - and sometimes by other pupils – and, of course, sexual abuse.

The question that Renton asks is why parents should subject their children to this. His answer is the established culture of the upper- and middle-class British that boarding school and its ways are good for you. It gives you access to a privileged education and it makes a man/woman of you. This cultural assumption is so embedded that it over-rides the mother’s and the father’s natural instinct for proximity and affection for the child. It is so strong that often pleas from the child to be taken home are ignored. But more tellingly, the practice is ‘normalised’ by parents and children such that

children come to believe it's the right thing for them or is such that children *don't* appeal to be brought home, but go along with it, pretending to be happy: to be unhappy is failure.

Renton gives an interesting history of the British public boarding school: the nineteenth-century school with its narrow curriculum of classics, Greek and Latin and the overwhelming emphasis on competitive sport designed to produce 'good chaps' who would play cricket and run the empire. He shows how the boarding school reflects the attitude of the British to its children. Poland was the first European country to abolish corporal punishment in 1783; England and Wales were the last to abolish corporal punishment in independent schools in 1998. Britain appears to be the cruellest country to its children.

Of course, for many people public school education has been very successful and they have enjoyed the ethos. But Renton uses his data from correspondents to assemble figures to demonstrate the proportion for whom it was a debilitating experience. And he finds evidence to show the self-preservation of schools in the face of criminal activities: abusive teachers who are given references to move on to posts in other schools; parents who are persuaded not to press criminal charges because it would be 'too upsetting'. Renton conducts a fascinating interview with Maurice, a convicted ex-teacher and child-abuser who explains that as a child he was abused by teachers who 'loved' him and he could give such love to his own pupils. A warning that some of the accounts make difficult reading!

In Education Studies Independent schooling is rightly a target for critique for the privileges it extends to the wealthy. This book serves to balance that with some sympathy for at least some of its beneficiaries.

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