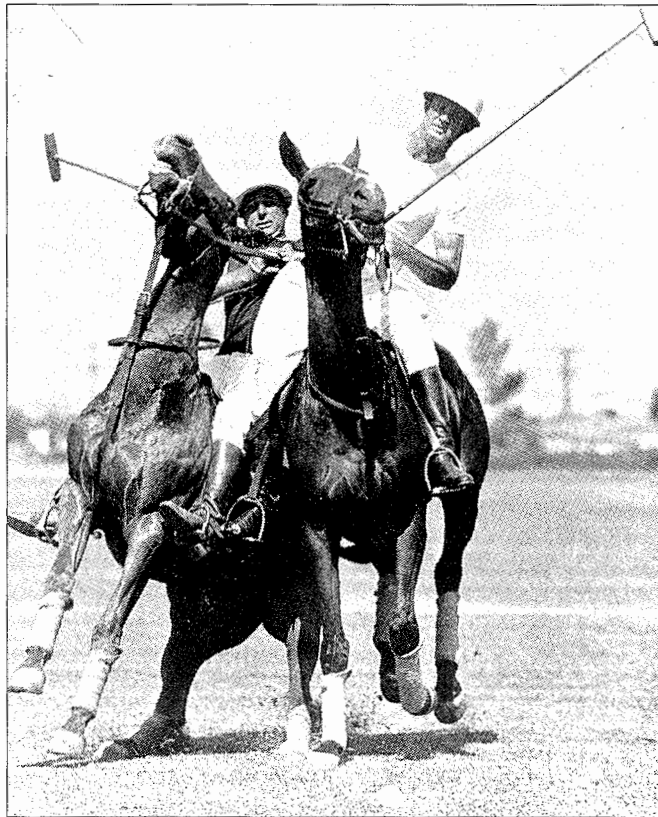

The Upper Class, Up for Grabs

BY NELSON W. ALDRICH IV



Easily the most conspicuous building in the flossy New York neighborhood of Madison Avenue and 72nd Street is the blown-up replica of a High Gothic reliquary whose original, one suspects, is to be found in some unvisited room of the Metropolitan Museum, eight

blocks to the north. Built in 1895, the mansion is now the flagship emporium of lifestyle outfitter Ralph Lauren, and it teems with visitors every day of the week.

But it is no less a reliquary for that.

The relics purveyed at Polo HQ are those of a social elite, now dispersed, called the

WASP upper class. The marketing pitch is faithfully echoed in the decor, which recreates a perfect period of the WASP ascendancy, those last few years before the Crash of 1929 when WASPs reigned supreme in the spiritual—that is, upward striving—aspirations of their fellow citizens.

It was a period not unlike our own recent past. For three presidencies in succession, all rich Americans had enjoyed the capital's heartfelt indulgence, the old-money Buchanans quite as much as the new-money Gatsbys. More to the point that Ralph Lauren wants to make, the WASP upper class before 1929 held undisputed sway over America's *stylistic* imagination. The celebritocracy had not yet spread its firmament over our heads, its stars twinkling in and out of existence like lights in a pinball machine. Thus the advertising industry had no imagery to work with to capture middle- to lower-class consumers, except images of wealth and social ease—in a word, "class." (The absence of the qualifier "upper" is a typical American hypocrisy, a ploy to arouse covetousness without arousing resentment.) By 1929 every opportunity-seeking American in the land of opportunity was being assailed by idealized visions of the haute WASPoisie at home, at play (often at polo, in fact), or on their way to work at the command posts of capitalism and democracy. WASPs in those latter days were still where Thorstein Veblen had located them in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), at the "radiant center" of American society.

So powerful was this imagery that it survived the Great Depression, the greatest blow to a group of upper-class status-bearers since the age of Jackson. Even during its depths, polo players such as the great Tommy Hitchcock—the model in part for Jay Gatsby's rival, Tom Buchanan—used to draw thousands of quite ordinary spectators to the fields of Meadow Brook to watch them play. (Today,

while almost no one watches polo, virtually everyone buys Polo polo shirts.) The imagery also got a boost, possibly, from the ebullient WASP in the White House; it certainly got one from the fantasists of sophisticated comedy in Hollywood.

But the radiant center could not hold after 1941. The vast democratization of social life during World War II dealt it one blow, the great democratization of prosperity that came after the war dealt it another, and the rise of the celebritocracy finished it off. The imagery dimmed and faded out. Beginning in the 1950s, consumers were tempted by a whole new range of stylistic options. Some were proudly middle class (Scandinavian furniture, "sportswear"), some were generational (kids and teens), some were geared to "leisure" lifestyles (most of these styles, ironically, were former working-class uniforms: the woodsy, the marine, the western), some manipulated racial consciousness (black fashions), but all pandered to an impeccably democratic aesthetic of self-expression, not class-expression. It was not until the early 1970s, with Watergate and the oil crisis, the gray dawn of the age of diminishing expectations, that pre-World War II WASP imagery began to return to consumer awareness. Retrieving it was Ralph Lauren's great idea.

It came, of course, like all lifestyles, with a specific ideological aura—in the WASP case, the aura of almost metaphysical belonging. After all, theirs was a class whose peculiar fortunes were *given*, not earned; chosen for them, not by them. And this given-ness, or fate, or Providence, or destiny entailed a particular, indeed an obligatory, role in American life: the stewardship of the nation's assets. WASPs were to "deserve" their privileges after the fact, as it were, by serving their countrymen as the trustees, the custodians, the curators of all that was good, true, and beautiful in this New World (including, needless to say, much of its wealth).

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Here is the deeper significance of that sense of easy grace captured in the shop windows of Polo HQ. One has only to look at the men and women in Lauren's ads, at the stoic set of their mouths and eyes, at the touch of melancholy in their *sprezzatura*. These are people in whom beauty is allied with power—no greater grace than this!—but in whom power is tempered by responsibility. If WASPs belonged socially, even transcendently, it was at the grave price of being obliged truly to take care of what belonged to them.

And this was only fitting. WASPs came by this "higher" calling rather as motorists who knock down pedestrians, rushing over to see what they have done, often find that the circle of bystanders around the victim parts to let them through. As WASPs were the first to profit by the march of free markets and technological progress, so they were the first to understand that while it is always necessary to destroy this village, habitat, way of life, etc., in order to save it, it is not always necessary to destroy absolutely everything. Some of it can indeed be saved. To the spoils, as Fitzgerald once remarked, belong the victors.

It is by their curatorial care, at any rate, that WASPs are now remembered. Private schools and colleges, art and natural-history museums, hospitals and parks, zoos and botanical gardens, historical societies and libraries, Nature herself in all Her conservancies—all testify to the WASP conversion from pillagers to preservers of the past. Nowadays, however, even this contribution is obscured. At the country's museums and libraries, for example, the commemorative plaques of WASP benefactors may soon be outnumbered by those of other ethnics. Hollywood has taken on the environmentalist duties of conserving Nature. No old-money WASP today puts together a museum-quality collection of anything. Boards of directors and of trustees look for bigger bucks, and more resonant minority status, than WASPs can provide. In short, there is little left to mark the place where WASPs once stood, stewards

of all they surveyed, except Ralph Lauren's store at Polo HQ.

What happened to the WASPs? Does it matter? These questions are significant enough to have generated a steady trickle of writings and readers. (And a river of customers for the Ralph Lauren lifestyle. "Belonging," if only the image of it, is not easily given up.) Unsurprisingly, it turns out that what happened depends entirely on one's point of view. The task of understanding, as Nietzsche once mocked, makes us all into Don Juans of the multiple perspective.

WASPs have two perspectives on the matter. One view, beginning with Henry Adams's lament about his kind of people going the way of the buffalo, is more or less Darwinian. Successive waves of immigrants surged onto our shores, the Adams theory holds, leaving behind masses of struggling ethnics any one of whom was better equipped to survive in America, on America's terms, than those who came here first, like the Adamases. Adams had in mind "a furtive Yacoob" from Warsaw; today's younger WASPs, who are scarcely alone in this, have in mind a Lee Chung from Hong Kong, or even, thanks to that forced inner immigration known as affirmative action, a Mustapha Jones from Harlem.

Of course, as Adams would have been the first to point out, this account of WASP decline says more about America's terms of success than it does about WASPs, or even about ethnics. These terms were set with Andrew Jackson's humiliating defeat of Adams's grandfather, or perhaps even earlier than that, with the passing of the Founding Fathers, including Adams's great-grandfather. Thereafter, the noble ideals and practices of the American republic were forever swept away by the unbounded appetites, the unappeasable restlessness, the narrow selfishness, the brutal rationalism, and the technological wizardry of the one truly American democracy—the democracy of the marketplace.

In this democracy Adamases lose out to immigrants (including in-migrants like Gatsby) for the simple reason that immigrants, unlike Adamases, are unburdened by the dogmas of an earlier democracy. Then, in the Adamases' perspective, the pursuit of purely individualistic visions of the good was supposed to be conducted with all due respect to the past and to posterity, and in a properly democratic spirit of civility, candor, and (social) conscience.

'Twas never thus, perhaps, but these dogmas of an earlier America, an exclusively white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America, did at least occasionally disturb the orgiastic worship of the free market. Now, according to the Adams theory, it is the orgy itself that is dogma, and American history consists entirely in a pleonastic ("more, more") struggle for advantage, one individual over another, one interest group over another, one immigrant group over another, at the trough of economic opportunity. In this perspective, shared with Adams by countless WASPs after him, America's elite is now just another defeated "group," slightly better off than the Indians, perhaps, but spiritually quite as irrelevant.

This is a not-implausible account of what led the WASPs to their dismal pass. The trouble with it is that it leaves no room for WASP responsibility in their fate, apart from their vague ineptitude at moneymaking, or for the continuing appeal of the Polo shop windows. For it seems unlikely, really, that WASPs should be entirely without blame for their decline, any more than they should be entirely without virtue in their lifestyle. Another WASP perspective, whose best-known expositor today is the novelist Louis Auchincloss, goes some way toward illuminating these issues.

Auchincloss's master theme is the loss of WASP authority. WASPs were not deprived of their stewardship; they lost it. They lost it through a fatal narrowness and flabbiness of character that sapped, and finally destroyed, the qualities of self-command required of

stewards. Auchincloss is not alone in this view. It was held before him, with varying degrees of envy, disappointment, and contempt, by Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J. P. Marquand, John O'Hara, and James Gould Cozzens, among our novelists. It was also the view of the two Roosevelts, among recent WASP presidents, and of John F. Kennedy, among recent hereditarily rich presidents. It is the view, as well, of E. Digby Baltzell, among sociologists and sociologizing journalists. It is a very common view.

It is also very often disputed—most recently by Andrew Del Banco in a recent review of Auchincloss's life and works in the *New Republic*. Del Banco faults the novelist's theory primarily on the grounds that it does not cut deeply enough, or painfully enough. First, says Del Banco, Auchincloss fails to establish that the WASP sense of public responsibility ever existed "in more than a handful of exceptional men." In fact, says Del Banco, if there was ever a time when the WASP elite exhibited in any depth the civic, never mind the domestic and pecuniary, virtues that Auchincloss imputes to them, Auchincloss himself has not found it. Second, Del Banco alleges that Auchincloss fails to establish that the WASP brand of public responsibility was ever "capacious," by which he means inclusive, welcoming, *widely* responsible, "before it became merely tribal." The most scornful thrusts of Del Banco's argument, in fact, go straight to this point: that the novelist himself, in his attitudes toward the "newer" ethnics, in his valuations of family and boyhood friendships, in his prissily archaic language, far from having transcended tribalism, has positively wallowed in it.

This, it must be said, is also a very common view. WASP critics of WASPs are always being attacked by non-WASP critics of WASPs for being insufficiently ruthless toward—nay, for harboring some slight tenderness or affection for—the sorts of people among whom they were born, educated, and made their earliest friendships. Ambivalence may be absolutely mandatory in other stories of betrayed

or abandoned "background" (who would read Amy Tan if she had turned on her mother's ways with pure contempt?), but WASPs, to other ethnics, are not just any other ethnic group. They are the ethnic group that fancied itself steward of its country's fortunes.

But bad stewards—bad because (unlike other ethnics, presumably) they behaved as a "tribe." For critics such as Del Banco, the custodians, all but a few exceptional men, were a stifling association of blood, breeding, and inordinate (that is, unearned) wealth and influence. In this view, WASPs have always done their evil best, for as long as they could get away with it, to hog all of America's economic resources, all of its awards of status and privilege, all of its cultural amenities, and all of its political influence. WASPs were bad, in short, because they stood against the essence of America itself, the promise of individual opportunity. Thus they deserve all the opprobrium they get, no less from one of their enlightened own, such as Auchincloss, than from their justly indignant victims.

Behind these charges, without question, is a true historical experience—the blackball—and a serviceable sociological generalization. WASPs blackballed at the loan desk, at schools and colleges, at trustee meetings, on boards of directors, in the conduct of public (especially foreign) affairs—wherever and whenever they were in command. The generalization is that, in blackballing people, the WASP ascendancy brought *social* considerations, specifically the right to choose one's friends and associates according to one's elective affinities, into business, political, economic, and cultural or educational realms where America-as-Opportunity declares they do not belong—where only merit, or only a Whitmanesque democracy, belongs.

This charge, growing out of that experience, seems accurate enough as far as it goes. Blackballing did happen (still does, in clubs), and the principle behind it is the social principle of elective affinity. The question occurs,

however, whether WASPs might not have been able to claim that *their* elective affinities, and therefore their blackballing, were governed by "higher" moral principles than govern the affinities of other Americans, either as individuals or as groups. And this claim, horribly invidious though it is, WASPs did make. There is something in the atmosphere at Polo HQ, WASPs would argue, that goes deeper than personal adornment.

But to be persuasive here, WASPs would have to answer one of Del Banco's questions: Was there ever a time when WASPs conducted themselves as a group according to "their brand of public responsibility"? I would argue that there was such a time, not indeed in the history of the country but in the lives of individual WASPs. This was when they were in boarding school. If I am right about this, then the "boarding-school moment," as one might call it, provides a standard by which to measure the extent of the WASPs' failure, both individually and collectively, of moral authority. This standard was set by their schoolboy, and schoolgirl, ideals.

That the issue is an educational one should be no surprise. In a culture of no culture (or of one, two, three, or many cultures) such as ours, education is always the issue. Thus by far the most arresting story Del Banco tells us about Auchincloss concerns an educational effort made by the novelist's late wife. It seems she was trying to set up a summer program for poor children in the New York City park system. "We saw kids . . . playing baseball in the bird sanctuary," Mrs. Auchincloss told an interviewer, "so we had to teach them what a bird sanctuary was, so they would play elsewhere."

Del Banco's gloss on this story (appropriately enough in a professor) is more ambivalent than what most non-WASP critics of WASPs would offer. Mrs. Auchincloss, he says, more or less approvingly, was acting out her class's most cherished values—"discipline, duty, and, in some half-sacrificial, half-

narcissistic way, a kind of American noblesse oblige." The trouble comes with the assumption that people like Mrs. Auchincloss actually had something to teach these "kids" about duty, discipline, and civic obligation. For if she did, it means that she and the kids were not on the same moral footing. And that way, as a professor knows better than most, lies the wrath of the people.

For whether the people are populists or Reaganite individualists—and most Americans are one or the other, or some combination of both—Mrs. Auchincloss's assumption is not, most emphatically not, PC. As a result, Del Banco must hedge his already mild approval by sneeringly imputing to her a sneer. Mrs. Auchincloss, he says, is giving in to an "impulse to lift the lowly out of their moral squalor;" she is indulging the old WASP habit of "teaching the barbarians to behave."

But leaving aside the sneers for a moment, it is clear that the lady is acting according to the educational ideals of the "boarding-school moment." I do not know whether playing baseball in bird sanctuaries is actually so hard on the birds, but if it is, then most American boys, not only poor boys, need to be taught that it is. Judging by the self-help shelves, they need to be taught just about everything else, from how to be men to how to how to argue with their spouses; so it stands to reason that they would need to be taught about how to behave ecologically correctly around birds. This is what is meant by growing up in a culture of no culture: Education has to do everything.

So the question then becomes, By what right of education do WASPs like Mr. and Mrs. Auchincloss arrogate to themselves the public responsibility of teaching their fellow Americans how to behave in bird sanctuaries? Or in banks, for that matter? By what moral reasoning was Clark Clifford led to advise his BCCI clients to get themselves a WASP president? Could it have been because Clifford supposed that WASPness still signifies to bank examiners and other such Americans some sort of su-

perior stewardly probity? Could WASPs ever claim, at any time, that this reputation was deserved?

Whether they could or not, they did. And if there were any grounds for WASP arrogance in these claims, they lay in the WASP boarding school. By this I mean chiefly the St. Midas schools, as Fitzgerald called them: Groton, St. Paul's, St. Mark's, and the like for boys, and Foxcroft, Madeira, and the like for girls. I do not mean the so-called Academy schools—George Bush's Andover, for example. The distinction, now blurred, was once vital. The Academy schools were governed by much the same ethos as governs most American high schools—most American life, for that matter. They are governed, that is, by a sink-or-swim, individualistic liberalism.

At the St. Midas schools, this was not at all the case. There, from the 1850s to the end of the 1960s, the most favored little children of the rich got an education the likes of which was nowhere else to be found in the New World. At St. Midas the reigning spirit was a decidedly un-American, unliberal, *paternalistic communitarianism*—a stewardship, so to say, of moral futures.

There is a surprisingly large literature concerned with these schools. Much of it, the stories and memoirs especially, is horribly, fascinatingly ambivalent—quite as much so as Amy Tan's work. For the writers of these works, Auchincloss among them (as in his best-known novel, *The Rector of Justin*), the tension between the ideological training "at school" and the experience of "the real world" would seem to have been almost unbearable. The "world," when these WASP boys and girls finally got out into it, was a place of liberation, of experiment and self-experiment, of constant perspectival adjustment, and of the headiest (because well-endowed) individualism. In a word, the "world" was a place of modernity.

"School" was something else again. From

the age of 13, these children were sequestered on vast country estates, far from the sinful cities, far from their parents' wealth, far from all consumerist temptations and media corruptions, for nine months of the year. There, they were not free to experiment; there, the perspective was *given* and *good*; there, individualism was a peril to the common welfare. At St. Midas, children were subjected to the most intense, unrelenting training in social consciousness and social conscience. Of course, the schools demanded individual performance as well—continuous, arduous performance that measured the children against all the norms of the "well-rounded man (or woman)." Students had to perform socially (manners and morals), aesthetically (looks, dress), athletically (team sports only), and, last and not least, academically—least, of course, because serious intellectual work is for loners, and loners might become moral experimentalists. Moreover, these performances had to be sustained day in and day out, without rest, without privacy, without let-up.

But it was the community, its past and posterity, that mattered most at these schools, far more than any individual. The community, under the paternal guidance and care of the rector, was the school's alpha and omega: the ground of its morality, the object of its care, and the warm viscous medium of every individual performance, for good or ill. This communitarianism had its sources in Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics, and in Anglican Christianity (though this last was mostly for a gentling aesthetic effect, stiffened somewhat by elements of the Social Gospel). Its didactic purpose, however, by which I mean its dialectical opponent, was thoroughly contemporary—the unfettered liberal individualism which in the economic realm had produced the inherited fortunes of these children, but which in the moral realm was always threatening to produce that ineffable carelessness, both private and public, which is the perennial weakness—and the charm, oh yes, the charm!—of the socially secure.

If the "boarding-school moment" was as

significant in the lives of WASPs as I think it was, then we have an answer to Del Banco's question. WASPs *were* once, and in depth, the avatars of their own brand of public responsibility—at boarding school. They failed then, as a class and as individuals, when they entered the "world" of modernity—with its liberations, its multiple perspectives, the wonderful optionality of its notions of the good, and the primacy, over the community, of the idea of the individual self. There were of course those "exceptional men"—few, according to Del Banco, thinking perhaps of stewards on a national scale like the Roosevelts; disproportionately many, I would argue, thinking of more local stewardships. But of most WASPs, judged by St. Midas' ideals, it has to be said that they've been "letting the old school down" from the beginning.

Actually, what most WASPs did was more complicated, and worse, than that. One must understand that St. Midas is in one sense a perfectly familiar place. It is the old ethnic neighborhood, the homogeneous small town, from which all Americans have chosen to flee. (All Americans, that is, except blacks, who had no choice in the matter.) In this perspective, St. Midas is just another of those ghettos that play such a powerful role in today's politics as "America's lost sense of community." But there is a grave difference in the relationship that WASPs ultimately establish with their "lost" communities and the relationships that other groups establish with theirs. The others can't go home again; they can't afford to. WASPs can afford to, and most of them do.

Their movement on leaving "school" is one step forward, followed by two steps backward. The forward step is, as I have suggested, a sort of emancipation, both in the modern sense of a liberation from oppression, and in the ancient sense of a banishment from all moral security. But then, even before 1929, many WASPs discovered that neither their ineffable belongingness, nor their superior

sense of the national interest, helped buoy them up, either spiritually or financially, in the eyes of their non-WASP countrymen. This came as a shock, as any reader of *The Education of Henry Adams* will remember, and it came again and again as each new generation of WASPs grasped its American birthright of freedom, and its family birthright of inherited wealth, and ran with them into the "world."

The two steps backward were taken soon thereafter. Other Americans who fail to "make it," either on their terms or the market's, are left to take what consolation they can from the thought that their failure was theirs alone—"alone" being the operative word here. Not so, thanks to their inheritances, the WASPs. They could salve their wounds by the simple expedient of retreating into the "tribalism" that evokes Del Banco's sneer. And there, in ethnically pure neighborhoods, they took their second step, back beyond the moral rigors of "school" to the soft certainties of childhood.

WASPs were hardly alone in wanting these havens in a heartless (I mean, free) world, but they were alone in bumping up against a humiliating contradiction at the heart of their havens. I mean that to get to Greenwich and Siwickli, even once there, WASPs had to pass through the reproaches of St. Midas. "School" might have been an ethnic ghetto, but it was also what few other ethnic ghettos manage to be, a training ground in universal, or at least national, ideals. Graduates were not supposed to end up huddled together like so many squeamish, frightened children, lamenting the vulgarity and obtuseness of the big, powerful, grown-ups. On the contrary, like Mrs. Auchincloss, they were supposed to translate their adolescent experiences and principles into a more worldly language of what might be called civic conserva-

tism. Americans quite properly love liberty, WASPs were taught at St. Midas, but most of them are badly in need of tutors to tell them what to do with it.

This was the historic role of the WASPs, to teach their fellow Americans at last what WASPs had learned first—that individual freedom is just another phrase for civic responsibility. No one at St. Midas ever assumed that this "school spirit" would be an easy lesson to get across in liberal, individualist, sink-or-swim America. But it was assumed that the sort of man or woman produced at St. Midas—strong, cultured, sure in his sense of what constitutes both the good life and the common good—would never give up trying to teach it. And indeed those "few" who did not give up found that there was a place for them, even in America, especially in educational, conservationist, and welfare (human conservation, as it were) undertakings.

Meanwhile, however, a curious cloak of invisibility has settled upon the WASPs, concealing their lives but projecting their lifestyles. They are a defeated people, much as Adams said they were, but a people defeated by their own failures, as Auchincloss and Del Banco say they are. They fail first to become what all good Americans are supposed to become, independent entrepreneurs of the sovereign self; and they fail, second, to be what St. Midas trained them to be, unAmerican tutors of the civily responsible self. All that remains of them is what Ralph Lauren chooses to let us know about them through his "authentic reproductions" of their personal adornments. Yes, a vague sense of belonging does emanate from these artifacts, but whether the ideals of civic conservatism emanate along with it, let the visitor to Polo HQ be the judge.