

Review of Born to Rule: The making and re-making of the British Elite, by Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman, Harvard University Press, 317pp.

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Born to Rule is a fascinating book, with only a few small faults. It demonstrates using better data than others have yet amassed, how almost a third of one (good) definition of the British elite attended only one of two universities (Oxford and Cambridge) and how, of those, a third attended only one of only nine elite schools; but most importantly it demonstrates who everyone else who enters the elite is always in some way ‘connected’, and that British society does not appear to have become more meritocratic over time.

The book is written in three parts: Firstly, three chapters concerning who the British elite are and how we can know. Secondly, three chapters on how the elite reproduce and keep their privilege and how people in positions of power who *appear not to be from elite backgrounds* so rarely are what they initially seem. Thirdly, three chapters on why this matters. The book ends with a concise conclusion and call for action, and a thorough methodological appendix on the sources used –hitherto unavailable details on all members of Who’s Who born after 1830, 214 in-depth interviews or analysis of previous interviews carried out with surviving members, and a further 144 interviews of those who answered a survey. The appendix also details how the probate registry, established in 1858, was interrogated to ascertain the wealth of the elite and their relatives.

The key source for this book is *Who's Who*. At any one time only 0.05% of the British public are in *Who's Who*. The authors of this book have taken the database from 1890 to the present day and worked out what it takes to be somebody to get into the elite. Over sixty percent of people in *Who's Who* are related to some one else who is included. The descendants of people in *Who's Who* are 120 times more likely to be in than the general population. Much higher if they attended Oxbridge (350 times higher), and even the graduates of the lesser, but still elite, London Universities are 100 times more likely to enter the elite than the common 'man'. Women who attended an elite girl's school are some 20 times more likely than average to 'become' elite. Members of the British elite are hardly ever 'self-made'.

One question the book poses: is how did these families keep their positions at the top of society? It reveals that within just five years of the end of World War Two, the richest 1% of people in Britain began to routinely hide at least 60% of their collective wealth from the government to shield it from inheritance tax; the money was hidden away, presumably illegally. A huge amount of that money had come from colonies, from plantations and from the labour of black and brown subjects of the British empire. Empire still matters greatly. Only 4% of new entrants to the elite are not white, whereas 25% are women and the remaining (almost three quarters of) newcomers remain white men. Some findings are stunning: Not a single person from a family with negligible wealth made it into the British elite, ever (see page 113).

Some of the elite appear to deliberately include lowbrow interests to appear less separated. Born to Rule gives the example of the sociologist (Baron) Anthony Giddens mentioning his support for the football team Tottenham Hotspur among his interests. Others replied to the interviewers' questions on whether it is possible to distinguish between good and bad taste, in Latin: '*De gustibus non est disputandum* {translation: there is no accounting for taste}.'

I spotted only a single possible error in the book, on page 147. The Freedom of Information request answered by my university giving the income distribution of undergraduates almost certainly only relates to poorer undergraduates applying for means tested help. The authors did express surprise that the income of the 99th

percentile of those Oxford university students' parents was *only* £100,000 a year, with 1% having higher incomes than that. That was the figure for ones who thought they were poor.

This is an excellent book detailing a meticulous and careful study. Its authors have suggestions to address the problems of nepotism, corruption and lack-of-ability amongst those who still run Britain today. The target audience is sociologists and anyone interested in class, or the UK.

