

The Story of Wandsworth's Meritocrats*

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Who or what is a meritocrat? There's no official definition; and the term, although comprehensible, is not widely used. In essence, however, the concept is straightforward enough. Meritocrats are outsiders from humble backgrounds, who make it to the top on the sheer strength of their personal abilities. Of course, they may well get help as their careers progress. It's rare for a star to rise without any assistance from others – whether from family, friends, teachers, or patrons.

Nonetheless, true meritocrats rely ultimately upon their own talents and abilities. They do not have a head-start based upon high-status family connections, or upon great wealth, or upon powerful patrons, even if they may acquire some of those assets as they rise.

One meritocratic *arriviste* from Tudor Wandsworth has recently featured in the prize-winning novels of Hilary Mantel. Thomas Cromwell began life in c.1485 as the only son of a Putney blacksmith, who also owned a brewery. But the middle-ranking father was notably outclassed by his ambitious and talented offspring. Thomas Cromwell's conjunction of legal, political and administrative skills raised him to the position of Henry VIII's chief minister from 1532-40. Furthermore, he was elevated to the English peerage as Earl of Essex.

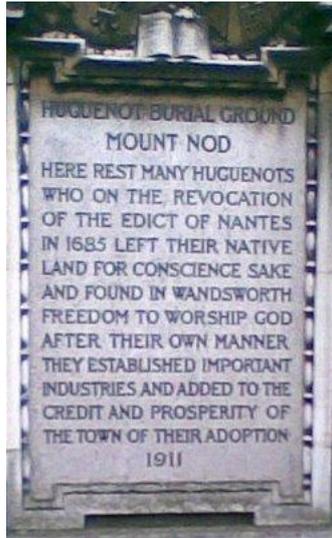
Yet, immediately he lost the king's favour, Cromwell lost his head – and the earldom was forfeited. It was a reminder that stars could fall as well as rise. Incidentally, surely there should be some memorial at Thomas Cromwell's birth-place on the site now occupied, suitably enough for a brewer's son, by the *Green Man* pub on Putney Hill?



From a Putney brewery to the councils of King Henry VIII:
Thomas Cromwell (c.1485-1540) – a classic Tudor meritocrat,
who rose high and fell fast.

As this historical example indicated, many traditional societies, however unequal their social structures, make room for a certain number of individual meritocrats. High-born leaders often lack sufficient talent amongst their heirs. The hereditary principle promises stability and continuity over successive generations rather than the constant provision of ability. Hence low-born people with outstanding qualities were sometimes able to advance to the top – or into comfortable positions closer to the top – by virtue of their personal powers.

A signal group of meritocratic ‘outsiders’, who settled in Wandsworth town centre in the later seventeenth century, were the French Protestant Huguenots. They rejected Louis XIV’s clampdown on their freedom of worship and made successful careers for themselves in England. None rose as high as the ambitious Thomas Cromwell. But all served to advance Wandsworth’s commercial and industrial development. Indeed, these solidly prospering Huguenot families indicated that urban trades regularly provide opportunities for newcomers whilst the highest ranks of landed and titled society are often more difficult to penetrate.



Memorial in Wandsworth's Mount Nod Huguenot cemetery, erected in 1911 at a time of Anglo-French entente.

Military careers can, in particular, provide scope for dramatic possibilities, especially in wartime when effective leaders are at a premium. Switching attention from Wandsworth for a moment, the swashbuckling generals of Napoleon's *Grande Armée* constituted a classic set of military meritocrats. Celebrated fighting men like Murat, Ney, and Bernadotte came from 'middling' backgrounds to rise high. One indeed ultimately outlasted the super-meritocrat Napoleon himself.

In 1810, Marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, the son of a French provincial lawyer, was elected as heir to the Swedish throne. And he survived there, whilst Napoleon in 1815 lost the French imperial crown and Napoleon's brothers, briefly enthroned in Naples, Holland, Spain and Westphalia, also lost their kingdoms.

Today the Bernadotte dynasty still reigns in Sweden. This saga of a meritocratic-turned-aristocratic family showed how time could neutralise the 'shock of the new'. But the Swedish monarchical style remains relatively low-key; and Sweden later became one of the first countries to end the ancient rule of male primogeniture that prioritises sons over daughters in the still-hereditary succession.



(L) Marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, later Sweden's King Karl XIV Johan, on the battlefield holding the baton of a Napoleonic general; and (R) his descendant, Karl XVI Gustav, King of Sweden, in modern regiments.

Wartime upheavals, as during the Napoleonic wars, often provided scope for dramatic changes of fortune, particularly for men. Traditionally, however, women's opportunities were much more restricted. Classic advancement options for poor but able females were posts within religious communities; or roles within the arts, especially the performing arts; or, for women with beauty and/or sexual allure, the risky life of a courtesan – or the comparatively rare chance of marrying 'up' the social scale.

South-west London residents at the time of the Napoleonic wars witnessed the career of one celebrated female adventurer, who both rose and fell in dramatic style. She was Emma, Lady Hamilton.

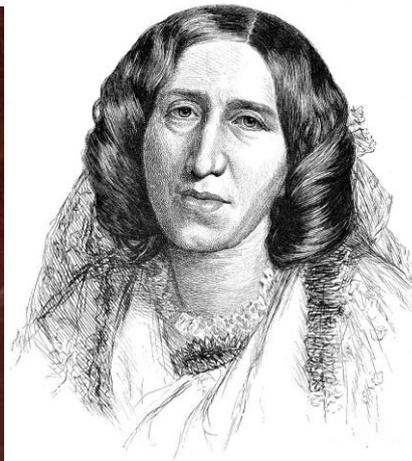
Born Amy Lyon, the daughter of a poor Cheshire blacksmith, she won the attention of a string of young aristocratic lovers before marrying the elderly Sir William Hamilton, Britain's envoy in Naples. Then she hooked Horatio Nelson, himself a rising naval meritocrat. He and the Hamiltons established a scandalous *ménage à trois* at Merton Place, just outside Wandsworth and handy for London's main route to Portsmouth.

Emma Hamilton clearly had more than just sex appeal. She was the muse of painters, as well as being a mime artist and singer, and had a magnetic personality. But after Sir William's death, she failed to win the prize of respectable wedlock with the already married Nelson.

So, after his death at Trafalgar in 1805, Emma Hamilton's spectacular rise was reversed. Ten years later, she died in poverty-stricken

exile in Calais, with her illegitimate daughter by Nelson unacknowledged. The government ignored his dying request to help her.

Instead, honours were heaped upon Nelson's elder brother, William, a respectable clergyman. He became Earl Nelson and Viscount Merton, founding a titled family which survives to this day. Meanwhile – and much more mundanely – her local connections were recorded in the name of a well-liked south Wimbledon pub, the Emma Hamilton. Sadly, however, the venue closed down in 2010.



Two unconventional women:
(L) Emma, Lady Hamilton, who began life as a poor blacksmith's daughter and might have died as Countess Nelson had Nelson lived longer;
and (R) Mary Anne Evans, who wrote imperishable novels as George Eliot.

For most of the nineteenth century, the scattered riverside settlements of Putney, Wandsworth, and Battersea were quietly attractive places to reside. They were close enough to London to share its pleasures but far enough away to avoid its crowds, bustle, noise, and fumes.

Numerous literary men and women chose to live there. In the 1860s a modest Southfields villa, named Holly Lodge, was home to one literary meritocrat among meritocrats. Mary Anne Evans, writing as George Eliot, was in course of transforming herself. She began life as the plain, clever daughter of an estate steward from a lower-middle class provincial background, steeped in low church Christian evangelism. But as George Eliot she became a literary beacon and secular moralist, internationally admired, amongst the metropolitan intelligentsia. Indeed, her reputation today, as 'England's Tolstoy', remains undimmed.

Interestingly, the utterly unlike George Eliot and Emma Hamilton both found themselves challenging conventional morality. They lived with men to whom they were not legally married. Eventually, that handicap

undid Hamilton. Yet Eliot's personal decorum – and the long-term power of her pen – enabled her to rise above this social difficulty.

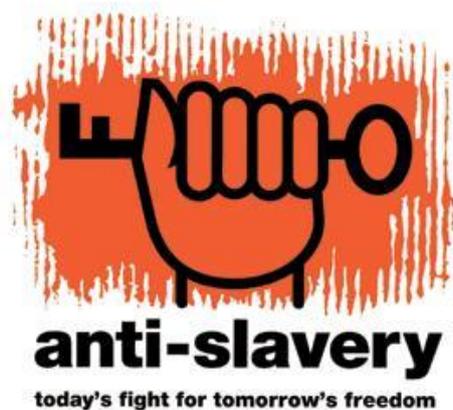
It may be asked how far meritocrats have to elevate themselves above their origins to count as genuine meritocrats? In Eliot's case it was not so much the height of her social climb that impressed. She did not come from dire poverty. Nor did she did attain (or seek) great wealth, aristocratic title, or social glamour. Eliot's rise, however, was one of supreme literary attainment – which was especially notable at a time when educational opportunities for women were still very restricted.

Each individual story remains unique, whilst also showing the range of possibilities within any given society at any given time. Three final examples come from the world of politics, which is a field that offers scope for personal flair amongst the claims of party discipline.

William Wilberforce qualifies not so much for the height of his social rise but for the magnificence of his impact. Born the son of a tolerably well-to-do Hull merchant, he came to settle in a large private residence in Battersea, close to Clapham Common. Although a relative outsider in the social world of titled landowners, Wilberforce entered the restricted field of eighteenth-century politics without too much trouble.

What he did there, however, set him apart. He dedicated his life to campaigns for moral and social reform – including, above all, the abolition of Britain's slave trade (achieved in 1807) and slavery in all Britain's dominions (achieved 1833, with subsidiary legislation 1843). Certainly, he had many helpers. His high-minded friends and neighbours in Battersea and Clapham, known together as the Clapham Sect – many of them Nonconformists – supported him. Moreover, numerous slaves resisted their bondage, either directly or indirectly.

Within the reform context, however, Wilberforce himself came to personify a somewhat priggish but single-minded dedication to anti-slavery campaigning, which, depressingly, still remains today an urgent priority. Such a democratic cause, to free the potential of all people in all walks of life, must be dear to every meritocrat.



The logo of Anti-Slavery International,
the world's oldest human rights organisation:
see www.antislavery.org

Supporters of widening access also campaign for better educational opportunities and the ending of all forms of discrimination – policies that are taking time to implement world-wide. But it is notable that popular politics and trade-unionism in nineteenth century Britain had already begun to bring some remarkable men to the fore. They were working-class leaders, who got their education and skills on the job.

John Burns was one notable pioneer. In 1858 he was born in the Nine Elms slums, spawned by Battersea's fast-growing riverside industries. His father, a Scottish fitter, abandoned his large family to poverty. The young Burns left school at the age of ten and made his way in the early trade union movement. He founded his own Battersea Labour League, whilst also supporting pragmatically the Lib-Lab political alliance. From 1905-15 he was welcomed into power by the Liberal government. He served as minister for local government, before Burns eventually (and regretfully) resigned in opposition to World War I.

Considered as a social trajectory, from the slums to the British cabinet, this rise was even more impressive than that of Emma Hamilton. Moreover, Burns gained power in his own right. Throughout, he remained loyal to his working-class roots. Both in and out of power, he continued to live in Battersea. And in 1901, he declared stoutly to his fellow MPs: 'I am not ashamed to say that I am the son of a washerwoman'. It was the proud claim of a self-made man.

Meanwhile, today, he remains commemorated locally, not least in the name of John Burns School. In general, however, the reputation of the

man once known as the ‘Colossus of Battersea’ has faded over time, as even the greatest of political reputations usually do.

Even more impressive was the career of another stalwart of the twentieth-century Labour and trade union movement, who represented Wandsworth Central in Parliament from 1940-50. Ernest Bevin was illegitimate, born into a deprived West Country family. He never knew his father and had little formal education. His powers of leadership and organisation, however, gave him a remarkable political career, and his early years as a Baptist lay-preacher had honed his oratorical skills.

Bevin, a massive John Bull of a man, became Britain’s preeminent trade union boss in the 1930s. He then served as Minister of Labour in Churchill’s wartime cabinet and as Foreign Secretary in Attlee’s postwar Labour government. Bevin had little life outside politics; and he sought no public honours. His ashes, however, were buried in Westminster Abbey – and he is commemorated in Tooting by Ernest Bevin College.

Both these Labour ‘big beasts’ may be compared across time with Thomas Cromwell. All were Wandsworthian meritocrats who rose to high office through their outstanding leadership and organisational skills.



Three meritocratic political administrators with their signature paperwork:
(L) John Burns from the slums of Nine Elms in Battersea;
(Centre) Thomas Cromwell from Putney; and
(R) Ernest Bevin who moved from Somerset to represent Wandsworth Central.

Somehow it’s hard to imagine that future historical novelists will be penning novels about the inner lives of Burns and Bevin. But who knows? After all, Thomas Cromwell was not traditionally considered as a romantic figure. Yet later generations like to recount tales of surprising advancement and achievement.

My own research analyses the emergence of individual meritocrats, such as these in Wandsworth – as well as the ramifications of campaigns to widen opportunities so that all potential meritocrats may flourish. As the liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill once remarked, societies cannot afford to waste their sum total of human potential. In the meantime, the area of Wandsworth alone has produced enough unexpected meritocrats to keep future historians and novelists busy.

This account is an abbreviated version of a paper given to Wandsworth Society on 24 Feb. 2012. For further details, please contact p.corfield@btconnect.com.