

OCCUPATIONS AMONG BRITISH MILLIONAIRES, 1857-1969

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In any study of the accumulation of national wealth, especially over an extended period of time, the role of the individual entrepreneur must be of paramount importance. However, the actual holders of great fortunes—as opposed to the small minority of technological innovators among businessmen or inventors—have received comparatively little attention, doubtless because of the difficulty of arriving at an accurate and comprehensive enumeration of wealthy persons, in other words, an enumeration that is free from the element of repute.

It is possible, however, to arrive at an accurate and comprehensive listing in the case of persons deceased in Great Britain, whose estates, since 1857, have been officially valued at the time of their death by the Principal Probate Registry at Somerset House. It is the purpose of this short article to cast some light on shifting occupational patterns among British millionaires that emerge from this data. For the purposes of this discussion, a “millionaire” is a person whose estate is valued at £1 million or more at the time of his death.

There are two salient points that must be noted as to the accuracy of the Probate data. First, between 1857 and 1926, the Principal Probate Registry failed to include in its valuation settled (entailed) estates. Among the millionaire class, probably the only group of persons thereby excluded was large landowners. As it happens, the rental worth of this class is known from the *Return of the Owners of Land*, drawn up by Parliament in 1871-74. In this discussion, any landowner with an annual rental of £60,000 or more has been taken as possessing a gross fortune of £1 million or more, and successive heritors of each such estate, deceased between 1857 and 1926, have been added in at the death of each.¹

Second, some doubts have been cast² on the accuracy of the Probate data for persons deceased since c. 1955. This is so because the main purpose of the Probate Registry valuations, the determination of death duties, has resulted in the proliferation of legal and quasi-legal devices by wealthy persons to avoid the payment of some or any such duty, e.g., the discretionary trust, transfer of assets to tax-free areas abroad, et. al. However, the surprisingly high number of millionaires deceased during the recent period argues that the extent of such alleged estate duty avoidance has been exaggerated. The actual number of millionaires deceased annually during the recent past is a speculative question; perhaps one accurate guess is that there are around 2.5 times as many millionaires deceased annually in Britain than is indicated by the Probate data.

Table 1 lists the number of millionaire deaths by decade. It is evident that the number of millionaire deaths increased enormously at the turn of the century, and decreased, though not considerably, during the period of austerity and depression, 1930-1949. Further, if the degree of disparity between the actual and Probate source figures suggested above is accepted, the number of millionaires during the most recent period must be substantially higher than at any period in history.

Table 2 enumerates the chief sources of millionaire wealth by longer periods. To illustrate the major occupational shifts that have taken place over the period since

¹The sources for these individuals have been Burke's *Peerage* and *Landed Gentry*. After c. 1880 the figures for landed millionaires are probably exaggerated, because of the decline in the value of landed property that took place. The ratio of £60,000 p.a. to £1 million is the approximate value at the time. See F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1963), passim.

²E.g., in Oliver Stutchbury, *The Case for the Capital Tax* (Fabian Pamphlets No. 388, 1969), p. 2.

TABLE 1
DECEASED MILLIONAIRES BY DECADE

Probate Sources		Mentioned only in the <i>Return of the Owners of Land</i>
1857-69	13	65
1870-79	13	
1880-89	11	
1890-99	32	
1900-09	54	28
1910-1919	57	
1920-29	89	6
1930-39	77	
1940-49	77	
1950-59	45	
1960-69	62	

1857, categories of employment have been grouped into three headings: "old", "intermediate", and "new" trades. Under the first heading are occupations, like agriculture, textiles and clothing, et. al., that were of more importance in the national economy during the nineteenth century than in the later period. The "new" trades are those, like retail chains and consumer goods, that are of more importance today. In the "intermediate" class are trades, like the production of alcoholic beverages and heavy industry-engineering that were judged to be of equal importance throughout. This classification is made only as a heuristic device: it is evidently possible to quibble with the classification that has been made. Two occupational classes, rentiers and holders of urban property, are not classes within any category.

The chief trend to emerge from the data presented is the dramatic decline in the importance of primary production and the staples in the sources of great fortunes, and the increasing importance of the newer, consumer-oriented trades. The decline in the importance of agriculture is particularly striking, and has closely paralleled the decline in the place of landowning aristocrats in the political life of the nation.³ On the other hand, there has been a rise in recent years in the number of deceased millionaire owners of urban properties, especially the owners of business properties in the City of London.⁴ Two other categories of trades no longer produce great fortunes to the extent that once they did—banking and finance, and textiles and clothing. The groups exhibiting the greatest proportionate rise have been those dealing with consumer trades—consumer goods like paints, electrical parts, travel agencies and the like—and retail shopping chains such as Sainsbury's and Woolworth's. The "old" category of trades accounted for 81% of the total in the nineteenth century, but only 36% during the decade 1960-1969; conversely, the "new" trades grew from less than one per cent in the early period to 38% in 1960-1969. This trend has been roughly steady throughout.

Several points emerge from Table 2 toward our understanding of British economic history during the past century. The long-term decline of Britain as the leading economic power that has taken place during this period may be perhaps due less to the failure to produce entrepreneurial figures than has been imagined. There has surely been no lack of successful entrepreneurs among the newer, consumer-oriented trades, and they were certainly no less successful, from the point of view of personal wealth, than the

³See J. A. Thompson, *The House of Commons, 1832-1901* (Cardiff, 1938).

⁴On this see Oliver Marriott, *The Property Boom* (London, 1965), passim.

TABLE 2
OCCUPATIONS OF DECEASED BRITISH MILLIONAIRES

	1857-1899	1910-1919	1920-1939	1940-1959	1960-1969
<i>Old</i>					
Agriculture	65(R) + 9 = 74	28(R) + 14 = 42	6(R) + 23 = 29	28	9
Minerals	7	6	7	1	4
Foreign Merchants	4	4	4	2	1
Textiles and Clothing	6	10	20	10	2
Banking and Finance	15	23	16	7	2
Insurance	1	0	4	4	0
Stockbrokers	1	3	1	0	2
<i>Intermediate</i>					
Alcoholic Beverage	8	6	12	9	2
Heavy Industry—Engineering	9	8	10	6	6
Transport	5	14	17	17	7
<i>New</i>					
Foodstuffs	0	2	13	9	7
Tobacco	0	4	8	11	0
Consumer Goods	1	10	9	3	2
Newspapers	0	0	5	3	2
Retail Chains	0	0	7	5	8
Rentiers	3	5	4	3	4
Urban Property	0	2	2	3	7
Miscellaneous			2	2	1
	TOTAL 133	TOTAL 139	TOTAL 170	TOTAL 143	TOTAL 62
	<i>Old</i> 108 = 81%	<i>Old</i> 88 = 67%	<i>Old</i> 81 = 48%	<i>Old</i> 52 = 45%	<i>Old</i> 18 = 36%
	<i>Int</i> 21 = 16%	<i>Int</i> 28 = 21%	<i>Int</i> 39 = 23%	<i>Int</i> 32 = 26%	<i>Int</i> 13 = 26%
	<i>New</i> 1 = 1%	<i>New</i> 16 = 12%	<i>New</i> 42 = 25%	<i>New</i> 31 = 26%	<i>New</i> 18 = 38%

See Notes

(R) indicates those landowners mentioned in the *Return of the Owners of Land* worth £1 million or more, but absent from the Somerset House lists

“Minerals” indicates owners of coal, iron, copper, etc.

“Textiles and clothing” including manufacturers of cloth and yarn.

“Transport” includes chiefly shipowners.

“Foodstuffs” indicates wholesale merchants of food and dairy products.

A “rentier” is one who has inherited a fortune, but is not associated with a particular industry.

“Miscellaneous fortunes” are those too diverse in source to categorize.

It is important to note that rentiers, miscellaneous businessmen, and urban property owners are not included when computing the percentages of the “Old”, “Intermediate”, and “New” trades.

entrepreneurs in the older and “intermediate” trades.⁵ The failure of Britain to keep the lead she built up before c. 1880 must be due to other factors—to the failure to produce scientists or technicians, perhaps, or to the inability of a medium-size nation to compete with giants like America or Russia.

Second, the alleged ability of wealth to give rise to more wealth in later generations of the same family has perhaps been exaggerated. Either through personal inability or the confiscatory effects of duties and taxation on fortunes left to heritors, several families formerly renowned for their wealth no longer appear as millionaires to the extent that formerly they did, e.g., the Wills family of the Imperial Tobacco Company, or the Coats of Coats & Clarks Sewing Thread. In 1900–1910 these two concerns were the largest industrial concerns in Britain.⁶

⁵This point is suggested by Charles Wilson in his “Economics and Society in Late Victorian England,” *Econ. His. Rev.* (Second Series, Vol. 18) 1965, p. 191.

⁶List in P. L. Payne, “The Emergence of the Large-Scale Company in Great Britain, 1870–1914,” *Econ. His. Rev.* (Second Series, Vol. 20) 1967.